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**Paintings of the Future:**  
**Photography in the Digital Age with Particular Reference to Andreas**  
**Gursky, Jeff Wall and their Contemporaries**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Sussex  
July 2012

### **Statement**

I, Katia Mai, hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

July 2012

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**University of Sussex**

**Katia Mai**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Paintings of the Future: Photography in the Digital Age with Particular  
Reference to Andreas Gursky, Jeff Wall and their Contemporaries**

**Summary**

The thesis investigates the oeuvre of Andreas Gursky, Jeff Wall and their contemporaries. It aims to provide an art-historical assessment, including the conceptual and philosophical context, complemented by an investigation of the production process of their photographs. One central focus is how the use of digital techniques and advanced printing technologies has affected their photographs.

The thesis provides a traditional descriptive investigation and comparison of the artworks discussed; in addition, it relates these photographs to other art genres and thereby offers broader connections to the art world. This *modus operandi* is enhanced by the inclusion of specific writings on the history and theory of photography, wherein neither the art genres nor the theoretical sources are subject to any temporal or chronological restrictions.

The thesis comprises six chapters:

I. 'What Happened to Baudelaire's 'Secretary'? The Role of Digital Technology in Contemporary Photography' provides the theoretical framework for an understanding of photographic developments in the past, the influence of production processes, digital manipulation, perception and popular understanding of photographs.

II. 'Oscillating between *Urmalerei* and *Urphotographie*: Gursky's Journey from Analogue to Digital' examines Gursky's use of analogue and digital photography through a number of case studies.

III. 'Images of our Time: Jeff Wall, 'a Painter of Modern Life' investigates Wall's artistic development, by focusing on his utilization of Baudelaire's concept of '*the Painter of Modern Life*'.

IV. 'Photographic Nuances and Variations: Contemporary Photographers in Düsseldorf and Vancouver' analyses the academic environment of Gursky and Wall and their fellow students.

V. 'Suspense or Surprise: At the Interface between Photographic Images and Film Stills' looks at the impact of the film genre on photography, and considers similar and comparable aesthetic and stylistic elements.

Chapter VI provides a conclusion and a brief outlook in respect of photography.

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I am greatly indebted to my supervisors Professor Maurice Howard and, in particular, to Professor David Mellor, who has, with great patience, not only advised me on the art-historical elements in my thesis, but has also made much more obvious to me the cultural difference between research and academic writing.

Finally, I would like to thank my family who have provided me with the necessary strength and confidence to write the thesis; Ulf Schmidt, my husband, has always supported this endeavour. I am grateful for his *übermenschlich* patience and his understanding at every stage of the project; I also like to thank my son Luca, who helped me to stay motivated in the very last stage of this project and I like to thank our rescue dog Bella, who reminded me every day during this study that even I need some fresh air!



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## I. Introduction

### What Happened to Baudelaire's 'Secretary'? The Role of Digital Technology in Contemporary Photography

In 1859, the French poet and literary and art critic Charles Baudelaire, despite never having visited the photographic section at the *Salon* of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris,<sup>1</sup> wrote that the invention of photography marked the beginning of a new era in which the industrial process had entered the field of art. Baudelaire was not particularly interested in the medium itself or its technique; he was wondering about the long-term effects of photography and of the many industrial mass-produced photographic images upon the established art genres and their recipients. He was concerned about the possible displacement photography could cause if it were '*allowed*' to be used for artistic works:<sup>2</sup> in his view '*the photographic industry was a refuge for every failed painter, every untalented and lazy person*'; the consequences would be '*delusion and stupefaction*'.<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire saw photography as art's '*most mortal enemy*'.<sup>4</sup> His comments have to be seen in the context of a Neo-Romantic reaction, which in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century caused controversy around the upcoming trend of Realism in the genre of painting and was, in that sense, also controversial about the photographic medium that aimed to depict its objects in the most truthful, authentic and realistic way.<sup>5</sup> In Baudelaire's opinion, photography could therefore fulfil only the role of a servant, like a '*secretary*' or '*minute taker*', for professions that depended on absolute accuracy.<sup>6</sup> Such an attitude was also a function of the perception of photographs, given

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<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire 2006, 109.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 111. Baudelaire: '*Wird es der Fotografie erlaubt, die Kunst in einigen ihrer Funktionen zu ergänzen, so wird diese alsbald völlig von ihr verdrängt und verderbt sein...*'

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 110-111. Baudelaire: '*Dadurch, daß die fotografische Industrie die Zuflucht aller gescheiterten Maler wurde, der Unbegabten und der Faulen, hatte diese allgemeine Überfütterung nicht nur Verblendung und Verdummung zur Folge, sondern wirkte auch wie Rache.*'

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from: Newhall/Glen (eds.) 1956.

<sup>5</sup> Baudelaire 2006, 109.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 111. Baudelaire: '*Wenn sie das Album des Reisenden schnell füllen hilft und seinen Augen die Genauigkeit verleiht, an der es sein Gedächtnis fehlen läßt, wenn sie die Bibliothek des Naturforschers schmückt, die Tiere unter dem Mikroskop groß herausstellt und die Hypothese des Astronomen stützen hilft, wenn sie der Sekretär und der Protokollant eines*

the monochrome appearance of these images on paper, as Professor of the History of Photography Michel Frizot has pointed out: '*Photographs [...] were from the outset perceived as graphical documents akin to drawings, lithographs, and engravings, a categorization reinforced by the illustrative use made of them. But this put photography merely in the role of an artistic accessory, "the humble servant of the arts", as Baudelaire called it.*'<sup>7</sup>

Baudelaire saw the medium of photography as a good means of record keeping, as it seemed to be able to replicate the objects in front of the camera so accurately. However, the reproduction of subject matter was in Baudelaire's view and in that of his contemporaries not in any way an art form. The American-born painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler, for example, who while working in Paris also belonged to an artistic circle that included Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas and Claude Monet, once expressed his concern about photography as follows: '*The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this.*'<sup>8</sup> Art was therefore defined by creative imagination beyond an objective and realistic appearance. It was hardly surprising, then, that photographers began to aspire to climb the Mount Olympus of the fine arts. The argument that photography was just a mechanical process for recording its subject matter in an authentic and truthful manner was refuted through a photograph by Hippolyte Bayard. In 1840 he depicted himself as a drowned man and produced the first staged photograph.<sup>9</sup> In order to achieve their goal of an artistic blessing other photographers imitated paintings from the point of view of subject matter as well as in appearance, as for example Oscar Rejlander's '*The Two Ways of Life*' (1857). In addition to referring to the content of painting, Rejlander also combined thirty separate negatives and enlarged the montage to the impressive (for the time) measurement of 79x41 cm, very much trying to compete with the size of paintings.<sup>10</sup> Not only was the photograph a show-case project for the elaborate technical skills and craftsmanship that were needed, it also made references to Renaissance painting, including allegorical characteristics of the

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*jeden wird, der in seinem Beruf auf absolute äußere Genauigkeit angewiesen ist, nichts könnte besser sein.'*

<sup>7</sup> Frizot 1998a.

<sup>8</sup> McNeill Whistler 1892, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Frizot 1998b, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Badger 2007, 32-33.

portrayed figures.<sup>11</sup> Bayard's and Rejlander's photographs were strong evidence that photography was more than an objective recording; it could be used to express creative artistic imagination: certainly Baudelaire's secretary could do more than just take minutes. Gerry Badger wrote about these early photographers, who '*fled from realism*': *'fine-art photographers could look to higher things for their subject matter, to painting and literature rather than unruly life, and they could create their images, like a painter, in the studio, using models as characters from the great works of fiction or art in these photographic tableaux vivants. The more technically skilled among them could fabricate elaborate concoctions by combining different negatives to make complex fictions that aped the "higher" themes of painting.'*<sup>12</sup>

Over the years I visited numerous exhibitions about Andreas Gursky and often I came across someone who would remark that s/he could take similar shots. A comment that reflected the common belief that everyone can take a photograph, at least from a technical point of view, as John Szarkowski once noted in his famous book *Looking at Photographs*. Already in 1973, Szarkowski had written in regard to analogue photography: '*In fact, the basic techniques of photography were never enormously difficult, and they have now become very easy. Like belles-lettres in a land of universal literacy, the art of picture-making is now open to everyone – or at least to anyone.*'<sup>13</sup> An easily accessible technique and the possibilities of leaving film developing in the hands of professional photo-labs, plus a '*naïve and illusory faith*', as Szarkowski put it, '*in the truth of a photograph*' as well as in the '*impartiality of the lens*',<sup>14</sup> had probably given rise to such a statement.

However, while looking at Gursky's photographs, I wondered whether indeed everyone could take these kinds of photographs. The only evaluation of these photographs that a visitor could make while walking through the exhibition was about what appeared on the photographic surface. But can we actually understand and evaluate these photographs without knowing anything about their origins? In regard to painting this is not an issue: people are given information or maybe know for example about the Impressionists painting *en plein air* and that this affected the appearance of their subject matter as well as the chosen colour scheme. When painters worked with photographs or utilized them for their paintings, visitors are often informed of this; for instance Gerhard Richter's 'painted photographs' can be understood only if one knows

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<sup>11</sup> Crawford 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Badger 2007, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Szarkowski 1973.

<sup>14</sup> Szarkowski 2007, 12.



that some originate from already existing press photographs or snapshots that he took. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once summarized the problem: '*One can only see what one already knows.*'<sup>15</sup>

After all, Gursky was a student of Bernd and Hilla Becher, known for their serial photographs in the style of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement,<sup>16</sup> but Gursky's images do not appear as if they were 'taken' in an objective way; they rather look as if they are 'made' somehow. In fact, Gursky began in around the 1990s to include a computer in his work-process. At first still shooting analogue, he used a hybrid approach and scanned his images in order to revise them later if necessary and, finally, printed them conventionally in his darkroom. Rapidly changing computer hardware and digital technologies made image processing programs more accessible and allowed not only photographers but also painters and sculptors to experiment with computer techniques. While Gursky first used digital techniques only as a retouching tool and to manipulate his compositions, he later started to generate and construct whole images using software.<sup>17</sup> With the help of advanced computer technology, photographers like Gursky and Wall were now able to assemble a photograph out of different shots, adding or deleting as many details as they wished; and all of these actions could be carried out independently from the actual moment when they pressed the shutter. In short, photography's task had shifted from being a documentary tool to becoming an inventive tool.

In one of his last interviews in 2006, John Szarkowski remarked: '*I am not interested in anonymous photography, or pictorialist photography, or avant-garde photography; I am interested in the entire, indivisible, hairy beast – because in the real world, where photographs are made, these subspecies, or races, interbreed shamelessly and continually.*'<sup>18</sup> In the post-modern era Baudelaire's secretary has become a mutating '*hairy beast*': not only have different photographic genres begun to mix, but, helped by among other things rapidly advancing computer technology and print techniques, it has become easier to '*interbreed*' with other things as well. Badger's statement<sup>19</sup> therefore does not apply only to photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like Bayard and Rejlander; it is also relevant to the post-modern photographers of the digital age who are represented in this thesis. These photographers make reference to pictorial and literary

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<sup>15</sup> Goethe in a letter to F.v.M., 24.04.1819, in: Beutler (ed.) 1948.

<sup>16</sup> See page 34..

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter II; '*Untitled XVI*' (2008), '*Untitled XV*' (2008).

<sup>18</sup> Durden 2006.

<sup>19</sup> See note 12 .

models, and even advertising and cinema; they are aware of the history of their photographic medium as well as the history of art; they work in studios, with sets and actors, and use expensive print techniques and sophisticated forms of presentation for their works. The aim of photographers like Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Wall and Stan Douglas has shifted; like their photographic ancestors Bayard and Rejlander they are no longer interested in documenting reality, but in realizing their pictorial ideas. Photography is no longer a servant to the arts; in some of the artworks presented in this thesis, Baudelaire's 'secretary' has acquired additional qualifications, has risen through the ranks and has become a chief executive.

The aim of the thesis is to investigate the oeuvre of two post-modern photographers: the German Andreas Gursky and the Canadian Jeff Wall. I try to analyse their work in regard to their personal background and their artistic development by looking at the influence of their families, friends and potential role models as well as contemporaries with a particular focus on their fellow students and teachers. A significant body of literature on Gursky and Wall has been published in relation to both artists, including catalogues, articles and books. In the following, I am surveying those works most influential to the thesis which provide a monographic background as a way of mapping key aspects of the artists' oeuvres.

Martin Hentschel's book Andreas Gursky: Werke 80-08 has been central to the study. It offers an encyclopaedic survey of 150 of Gursky's artistic works from 1980-2008. Hentschel explained why he opted this approach: '*Every single exposure in Gursky's encyclopaedic morphology is a vital piece in the puzzle, which, over the course of his 28-year career, has amounted to an encyclopaedia of the unencompassable*'.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the illustration of the catalogue over a considerable period of time, including photographs never before published, enabled me to trace the stylistic and compositional development of the former Steinert and Becher student and helped me to choose a representative selection of images to illustrate the artistic development of Gursky.

Veit Görner's exhibition catalogue Fotografien 1994-1998. Andreas Gursky is likewise essential for my thesis, given that the published letter exchange between the curator and the artist gave insights in Gursky's personal views about photography and photographic history.<sup>21</sup> The catalogue examined photographs from 1994-1998, two years after Gursky began admittedly to use electronic picture processing '*to emphasise formal elements that will enhance the picture, or, for example, to apply a picture*

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<sup>20</sup> Hentschel 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Görner 1998.

concept that in real terms of perspective would be impossible to realise.<sup>22</sup> The letter exchange revealed important details of the early use of digital technology and about the production process of Gursky's photograph '*Untitled V*' (1997), and thus helped to evaluate and understand his artistic approach. In one excerpt, Gursky speaks about the '*generally valid formal vocabulary*' of art history which he uses time and time again, a comment which made it plain that the application of Aby Warburg's methodological approach would be, by far, the most appropriate for the aims and objectives of the present study. This approach will be further discussed below.<sup>23</sup> The catalogue also comprises Annelie Lütgens essay '*Der Blick in die Vitrine oder Schrein und Ornament. Zu den neuen Bildern von Andreas Gursky*' which suggests that we can interpret Gursky's photographs '*as a process of ordering what he sees (die Fotografie als Ordnungsverfahren)*', an idea that could be applied – as the thesis will show – to some of his photographs, especially the ones which have been digitally-revised.<sup>24</sup> Another important aspect which Lütgen emphasised is Gursky's preference for abstraction: '*In Gursky's photographic experiment with abstraction it is not only architectural spaces whose inherent structures are dissolved in favour of an abstract pictorial structure.*'<sup>25</sup> For the purpose of this study it was interesting to see whether the use of digital technique has allowed Gursky '*to dissolve*' more '*inherent structures*' in his photographs.

Another important publication is the exhibition catalogue of the Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Ruhr-Universität Bochum Ansicht Aussicht Einsicht. Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth: Architekturphotographie by Monika Steinhauser and Ludger Derenthal. The catalogue investigated selected works of the above Becher students with a particular focus on their relationship to, and philosophy of, the field of architecture. The authors argue that all students use the descriptive and analytical means of architectural photography in the tradition of their teachers. However, they make it clear that the work of the students, unlike the oeuvre of the Bechers, questions the ability of the photographic medium to document a subject matter. In particular, Kai-Uwe Hemken's essay '*Von Sehmaschinen und Nominalismen. Anmerkungen zur digitalen Photographie von Andreas Gursky und Thomas Ruff*' draws the attention to the use of digital aspects of architectural photography.<sup>26</sup> With regard to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Görner 1998, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Hemken 2000, 29-39.

Steinhauser and Derenthal's approach to focus exclusively on architectural subject matters, I felt it was necessary to investigate other genres of the students as well, in particular the use of digital technique and, if possible, how it was used in the production process of their photographs.

The exhibition catalogue by Achim Sommer Zwischen Schönheit und Sachlichkeit. Boris Becker, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth seemed to offer an investigation of different genres, but, as the title already suggests, examined the oeuvre of the students in the tradition of New Objectivity. Nils Ohlsen concluded in his essay '*Zwischen Schönheit und Sachlichkeit. Bemerkungen zum Werk von Becker, Gursky, Höfer, Hütte, Ruff und Struth*' that the photographs of the students are located between objective documentary and abstract compositions.<sup>27</sup> Ohlsen's observation suggested, in my view, that the students had begun to adopt a different approach compared to their teachers. In addition, he commented on the similarities between painting and photography, arguing that the students not simply 'take' photographs but rather 'make' them. It was therefore necessary, in my view, to investigate how far the students had distanced themselves from the method of the Bechers and examine the consequences for the serial approach, the idea of structure, order and objectivity in their work.

Peter Galassi's exhibition catalogue Andreas Gursky which accompanied Gursky's first American retrospective in the Museum of Modern Art in New York has also been important for the thesis. Galassi provides a profound introduction into '*Gursky's world*' by examining, next to Gursky's references to painting, his turn to colour photography and digital technique, his brief time at the Folkwangschule under Otto Steinert and Michael Schmidt and his training with the Bechers. Whilst Galassi discussed the differences between Steinert's subjective approach and the Bechers's objective method, he does not engage fully in explaining how the actual methods were taught. Therefore, it is in my view essential to investigate Steinert's teaching method, which he called '*Vollendungsstufen fotografischen Schaffens*'<sup>28</sup>, as well as the Bechers serial approach, to understand some of the profound influences that have shaped Gursky's photography.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Galassi's catalogue provided me with two important aspects for my study: firstly, he summarized Gursky's work as follows: '*Documentary realism versus digital manipulation, modernist idealism versus postmodern scepticism, high art versus commerce, conceptual rigor versus spontaneous observation, photography*

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<sup>27</sup> Ohlsen 2000, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Steinert 2006; See Chapter II.

<sup>29</sup> Krief 2004; See also Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009.

*versus painting: these and other antagonisms have engendered some fierce battles, but for Gursky they are all givens – not opponents but companions. Much of the grace of his art and still more of its contemporary torque derive from the agility with which it accommodates a wealth of apparent polarities.*<sup>30</sup> This quote helped me to structure my analysis of Gursky's work and explain some of the origins of the antagonistic elements in his oeuvre which he unites so effortlessly. Secondly, Galassi's catalogue offered one of the rare insights into Gursky's use of digital technique.<sup>31</sup> I felt it was necessary to find out more about the use of digital technique and the actual production process in order to get a better understanding of the images, as I will explain in detail below.

In 2008, Michael Fried, Professor of Humanities and the History of Art at the Johns Hopkins University, published his book Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before.<sup>32</sup> Fried, who wrote various books about eighteenth and nineteenth century art, looked at the oeuvre of selected contemporary photographers, including Gursky, Wall, Höfer, Ruff, Struth and the Bechers, among others. According to Fried, being acquainted with Wall was instrumental in writing this book: *'From that moment on I started looking seriously at recent photography [...]*'.<sup>33</sup> The book differs from other approaches, since Fried is less interested in a simple art historical analysis and description of photographs; instead he tries to investigate why photographers depicted a particular subject matter and how these images were produced. Fried remarked: *'Rather, if I wanted to do justice to my subject, I would have to deal with the work of more than fifteen photographers (and, it turned out, video and film makers) in sufficient detail to convey a sense of what each was up to and at the same time to allow the connections I saw among their individual projects to emerge.*'<sup>34</sup> His book tries to give a critical reading of these different projects, given that these photographs (for example by Wall or Ruff) revealed *'issues concerning the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it'* which became crucial for photography as they had never been before.<sup>35</sup> This process, according to Fried, began in the late 1970s and 1980s when photographs were printed in large scale formats and entered into the world of museums.<sup>36</sup> In his view, art photography was forced to engage with issues that were

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<sup>30</sup> Galassi 2003, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Galassi 2003, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Fried 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>34</sup> Fried 2008, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2.

formerly exclusively related to painting. He argues that *'such photography immediately inherited the entire problematic of beholding – in the terms defined in my previous writings, of theatricality and antitheatricality – that had been central, first, to the evolution of painting in France from the middle of the eighteenth century until the advent of Edouard Manet and his generation around 1860, an evolution explored in my books "Absorption and Theatrically", "Courbet's Realism", and "Manet's Modernism"; and second, to the opposition between high modernism and minimalism in the mid- and late 1960s, as expounded in, and perhaps exacerbated by, my "infamous" essay "Art and Objecthood".'*<sup>37</sup> Fried investigates the projects of the discussed photographers and tries to analyse themes and representational strategies in their oeuvre, often in relation to philosophical texts (in particular by Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Hegel). There are two important aspects in his book that have influenced the present study. Firstly, his emphasis on the investigation of the different photographic projects in which he revealed, among other issues, the underlying production process to explain how meanings are created, has served as a model for my thesis. And secondly, Fried has written a well-developed art historical account which places a particular emphasis on linguistic aspects that are also present in Galassi's book. Compared to some of the German scholars, who write in a more analytical style (for example Sommer or Hentschel), Fried and Galassi give their accounts in a more engaging narrative style that conveys an art historical plot. In the following, I hope that the study will be able to combine an academic analysis with a narrative style.

Wall's Selected Essays and Interviews has likewise played a significant role for my thesis and provided me with essential information to examine his work. For example, he revealed details about individual artists and colleagues such as Roy Arden and Ian Wallace.<sup>38</sup> His essay *'Frames of Reference'* gave insights into the way in which Wall *'studied the masters'*. Since I am interested in the origins of Wall's artistic production, the thesis will look in particular at Édouard Manet *'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* (1882), Eugène Delacroix *'The Death of Sardanapalus'* (1827-28) and Katsushika Hokusai, *'A High Wind in Ejiri'* (1831-33). Wall remarked in regard to his art historical references: *'I realized I had to study the masters whose work, either in photography or in other art forms, didn't violate the criteria of photography but either respected them explicitly or had some affinity with them.'*<sup>39</sup> Wall's fourteen essays and the twenty three selected

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>38</sup> Wall 2007a.

<sup>39</sup> Wall 2007a, 175.

interviews span a timeframe from 1985-2006, offering a generous amount of information about Wall's artistic development and reveal details about the production process of some of his photographs .

Another indispensable book with regard to Wall's work was written by Craig Burnett. Titled Jeff Wall, it was published by the Tate Gallery in the Modern Artist Series.<sup>40</sup> His survey examines six key works of the artist and provides detailed background information through the inclusion of six interviews with Wall.<sup>41</sup> In the introduction, he remarked that Wall's work is '*about looking closely, about the pleasure of seeing the world in all its sensual intricacy.*'<sup>42</sup> Burnett offers the reader detailed descriptions of Wall's photographs and explores his references to art history and literature. The cinematic impact on Wall's practice and work is revealed and Burnett explains how documentary and staged elements are mixed in Wall's images. Based on Burnett's study, I decided to offer thorough descriptions of Wall's photographs before attempting to interpret their wider art historical and philosophical significance. The book also offered valuable details of the production process of some of Wall's photographs, in particular his digital collages.

It is the main task of the thesis to provide an art-historical assessment of these photographic oeuvres, which is extended by an attempt to make visible the production process of these images. The photographic medium heavily relies on technical developments which have influenced not only the presentation (style, composition, size) but also the production process of photographs. So in order to get a more complete analysis without exclusively focusing on the visible photographic surface, it is, I believe, important to shed light on preliminary processes, in particular the production process. Fred Ritchin, Professor of Photography and Imaging at New York University, aptly remarked about the production process of digital photographs, and more specifically about press and advertising photography: '*I've always spoken in the digital age of "digital image making," mainly because it is a manipulable medium. I suggested in 1994, that newspapers began terming their images as "photo opportunities," so it is clear to the reader and viewer they're looking at a staged event. [...] We have to tell*

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<sup>40</sup> Burnett 2005a.

<sup>41</sup> Burnett analysis '*Mimic*' (1982), '*The Storyteller*' (1986), '*Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After An Ambush Of A Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afganistan, Winter 1986)*' (1992), '*Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994*' (1994), '*Morning Cleaning, Mies Van Der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*' (1999) and '*The Flooded Grave*' (1998-2000). Burnett 2005a.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

*people how images are made. And, the first step is to abandon the idea we're looking at photographs. We're looking at entry points to information and to the world in which the image was made.*<sup>43</sup>

Ritchin's request to make the production process more transparent can also be applied to Gursky's and Wall's photographs since that such an investigation will change the perception of these '*photo-opportunities*' by revealing the different layers of their genesis. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the production process, I try on the one hand to shed light on the preliminary intellectual work if known or traceable, i.e. the conceptual and philosophical context from which these images derive, and, on the other, to complement this with an investigation of the technical and mechanical production processes that have taken place, including the execution process, and the staff, technical assistants and professional laboratories involved. In regard to these technical issues, one of the central foci is the use and influence of digital techniques on the actual act of photographing as well as the aesthetics and composition of these images, given that the method of production and composition at a computer screen differs significantly from that of conventional processes in the darkroom.

Undoubtedly digital technology and culture has had a mayor impact on the photographic medium. For example, Ritchin's book After Photography analysed the endless possibilities the digital revolution has offered and consequently showed how much the digital age has influenced the way we receive and perceive visual information, whether they are presented to us as press photographs, amateur photographs, mobile phone images, web images or images originating from surveillance cameras. Ritchin argues that digital technology has changed and transformed visual information that surround us, given that it is such an accessible technology for so many, as he points out: '*For example, some 250 billion digital photos were made in 2007, and nearly a billion camera phones were said to be used.*'<sup>44</sup> A fact that undeniably influenced the way in which images, and in particular photographs, are perceived and, as Ritchin points out, most of this digital impact is down to a simplified use of digital media. For instance, photographic images, whether they are already existing as digital files or have been digitalized later, can simply and instantaneously be manipulated by rewriting their digital data, a fact that leads Ritchin to believe that '*a photograph may be considered a menu to be touched or clicked, or simulated (although the scene depicted may have never occurred, and possibly never could), or its 0's and 1's may be transmogrified into anything else at all. Sections, segments, and*

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<sup>43</sup> Brooke 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Ritchin 2009,11.



*steps are stuff of the digital; [...].*<sup>45</sup> In Ritchin's view the digital data remains therefore in waiting until '*an author or an audience (or a machine) will reconstitute it.*'<sup>46</sup>

The study of Gursky's and Wall's work process will show that one can agree with Ritchin's statement, since that these artists not only act as photographers but as 'authors' who reconfigure the digital data of their images, if necessary pixel by pixel. However, although digital technology has become more accessible and simpler to use for most people, this does not necessarily mean that the digital technique has made the production of Gursky's and Wall's images less complex in any way. Both artists work with a 'hybrid approach' which combines analogue with digital photography and they also often collaborate with other technical experts. Their preliminary work and the technical requirements set them apart from any sort of digital amateur photography. It is not by chance, that both Gursky and Wall began to use computer and digital technique at the beginning of the 1990s, when hardware had shrunk to a more accommodating size and software, as Ritchin points out, became more accessible. The 1990s certainly sparked a new era of photography, as William J. Mitchell remarked: '*We can identify certain historical moments at which the sudden crystallization of a new technology (such as printing, photography, or computing) provides the nucleus for new forms of social and cultural practice and marks the beginning of a new era of artistic exploration. The end of the 1830s- the moment of Daguerre and Talbot- was one of these. And the opening of the 1990s will be remembered as another- the time at which the computer-processed digital image began to supersede the image fixed on silver-based photographic emulsion.*'<sup>47</sup> Photography's invention in the nineteenth century had already an impact on the perception of images, but the impact of digital technology on the photographic image has consequently caused a rethinking and rewriting of the traditional history of photography.<sup>48</sup>

Manipulating photographs with digital technique has, on the one hand, '*destabilized the photograph as a faithful recording of the visible*', yet on the other, has also made new methods, approaches and processes possible, but still '*the pixelated photography*' and its myriad ways of use, is in Ritchin's view, often not properly used by artists.<sup>49</sup> However, Gursky and Wall must certainly be seen as an exception; not only are these

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell 1992, 20.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Mitchell 1992; Batchen 1997; Ritchin 2009; Amelunxen 1996; Lunenfeld 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Ritchin 2009,53.

artists able to integrate digital technology in their work, consequently influencing the production process and appearance of their photographs, as we will see, but they also have established their position on the international art market, a fact that is mainly down to the art historical and philosophical concepts that, intended or not, underpin their works. Their work is rarely associated with any sort of simplified digital manipulation, although in Ritchin's view *'[...] photography in the digital environment involves the reconfiguration of the image into a mosaic of millions of changeable pixels, not a continuous tone imprint of visible reality. Rather than a quote from appearances, it serves as an initial recording, a preliminary script, which may precede a quick and easy reshuffling. The digital photographer- and all who come after her- potentially plays a postmodern visual disc jockey.'*<sup>50</sup>

Gursky's and Wall's work, in particular those photographs where we know that the production involved digital technique, are often assembled from different shots. Often a visual idea, inspired by existing images, photographs or witnessed scenes, is transformed into *'a preliminary script'* which will then be reconfigured and/or manipulated with great expenditure. A digital photograph can thus be seen, in Ritchin's view, as a *'mosaic'*, that *'allows for multiple pathways leading to new avenues of exploration – a hypertext.'*<sup>51</sup> In Gursky's and Wall's case, their *'photographic mosaics'* are often induced by different conceptual, philosophical and art-historical *'pathways'* which need to be explored to get a better and deeper understanding about the depicted subject matter.

Given that the impact of digital technology on the photographic process and its influence on the medium itself is at the centre of this study, it is important to address some of Geoffrey Batchen's observations made in his book Burning With Desire which provides a historiographical investigation of the origins of the photographic medium and is thus helpful in illuminating the technical and historical background of Gursky's and Wall's work. Batchen explains *'[...] that recent approaches to photography all hinge on photography's historical and ontological identity, a matter that both postmodernists and formalists think they have somehow resolved.'*<sup>52</sup> The key question for Batchen is whether *'photography is identified with (its own) nature or with the culture that surrounds it?'*<sup>53</sup> Batchen distinguishes between two approaches to photography, one by the formalists and the other by the postmodernists. The formalists are, in his view,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>52</sup> Batchen 1997, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

*'supposedly concerned primarily with the essence of the photographic'* and he further remarks *'find themselves building the foundation of this essence on history (on what lies outside the photographic frame).'*<sup>54</sup> Batchen illustrates the formalist theory based on the writings by John Szarkowski and Clement Greenberg, which ascribe natural and essential qualities to the photographic medium. The postmodernists, on the other hand, as Batchen remarks, are *'supposedly opposed to any search for essence'* and are therefore *'seeking to identify photographic epistemologies and aesthetics that are "fundamental", "essential", and "intrinsic" (and so are presumably internal to each and every photograph).'*<sup>55</sup> The postmodernist theory is outlined with the help of writings by John Tagg, Victor Burgin, Allan Sekula and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, which ascribe no coherent history to the photographic medium and believe that individual circumstances and context of a photographic image will explain its meaning.<sup>56</sup> Batchen believes that both theories have their *'limitations'* given that *'photography's identity can be determined as a consequence of either nature or culture.'*<sup>57</sup> Therefore Batchen's main task is to *'look for the identity of photography in the history of its origins'* which, in his view, might lead the way, as he implies, to a new post-modern theory of photography.<sup>58</sup> The concluding chapter proved to be particularly useful to this study, given that Batchen considers the position of photography in the digital age *'Where photography is inscribed by the things it represents, digital images may have no origins other than their own computer programs. These images may still be indices of a sort, but their referents are differential circuits and abstract data banks of information. [...] In other words, digital images are not so much signs of reality as signs of signs.'*<sup>59</sup>

With the arrival of digital technology the production and processing of photographic images has changed significantly: our deeply-rooted perception that a photograph depicts a true representation of the world in front of the lens is no longer the same. This then raises the question whether a photograph produced by means of a computer is a photograph at all or whether we have already entered a post-photographic era. Batchen certainly makes it clear that digital images differ from photographs: *'Photographs are privileged over digital images because they are indexical signs,*

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>55</sup> Batchen 1997, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2-21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 213.

*images inscribed by the very objects to which they refer.*<sup>60</sup> And the indexical link is certainly not the only dividing line between analogue and digital images; Jäger has pointed out that the very nature of a digital image differs from an analogue one: *'The electronic image replaces the photograph, the electronic ray, the light beam, the pixel the dot, the square the circle, the constructed the organic, the processor inside replaces the world outside. One speaks of "picture processing", "image processing", "imaging". The resolution in the scanner engulfs the resolution of the photo. Reality gives way to the calculated, which in its turn becomes reality.'*<sup>61</sup> Therefore it is worthwhile, as Batchen suggest, that we need to see the digital era as a historic moment in which we can find new ways to understand digital imagery.

Batchen also rejects the idea of a post-photographic era that might see the end of the photographic medium: *'Given the advent of new imaging processes, photography may indeed be on the verge of losing its privileged place within modern culture. This does not mean that photographic images will no longer be made, but it does signal the possibility of a dramatic transformation of their meaning and value, and therefore of the medium's ongoing significance.'*<sup>62</sup> Speaking about postmodern art photography, which serves as a way of categorising several of the photographers of the present study, Batchen explains how postmodernist photography is led *'by a concern for photography's own differences from itself, by a questioning of the traditional avant-garde desire for the "new" and by a somewhat anxious recognition that photographs had previously neglected its own identity as worthy of serious exploration.'*<sup>63</sup> Therefore, as Batchen explains, some contemporary photographers have returned to some of the methods and approaches of the conceptual art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s: *'In the process, the boundary between photography and other media like painting, sculpture, and performance has been made increasingly porous, leaving the photographic residing everywhere but nowhere in particular.'*<sup>64</sup> These blurred boundaries, as will be seen, can be observed in the work of Gursky and Wall and, in particular, in the oeuvre of the Vancouver school. Batchen concludes that in the digital age *'even if photography as a separate entity may be fast disappearing, the photographic as a vocabulary of convention and references lives on in ever-expanding*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>61</sup> Jäger 1996, 108.

<sup>62</sup> Batchen 1997, 216.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 216.

*splendour*.<sup>65</sup> Given the complexities and ongoing technical developments in the digital age, it is not only for Batchen difficult to suggest what might lay ahead. This study will try to take stock how digital technique has been used, if known, by some of investigated photographers and, in a further step, concentrate on the influence of digital technique on the photographic medium.

With regard to picture manipulation, one needs to take into account the essay '*Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some considerations*' by the American artist Martha Rosler who examined the problems arising from the digital invasion into the pictorial space: '*Pick a picture, any picture. The question at hand is the danger posed to "truth" by computer-manipulated photographic imagery*'.<sup>66</sup> However, Rosler explains that manipulation has been an integral part of photographic history long before digital technology arrived at the photographic horizon. With regard to a pre-digital history of manipulation, she looks, for example, at Rejlander's photographic montage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>67</sup>, Robert Capa's famous war photograph '*The Falling Soldier*' (1936) which some have labelled a fake, or a manipulated cover of the National Geographic in 1982 depicting two pyramids in which the space between them has been artificially reduced.<sup>68</sup> Rosler addresses the problems and consequences arising from the manipulation of images and suggests that digitally manipulated photographs can not be seen as evidence any longer. Their status as material evidence for the judiciary or media therefore require considerable reconsideration and cannot be taken for granted, as Rosler highlights: '*In sum, concerns about manipulation center on political, ethical, judicial, and other legal issues (such as copyright), as well as the broader ideological ramifications of how a culture deploys "evidence" it has invested with the ability to bear ("objective") witness irrespective of the vicissitudes of history and personality*'.<sup>69</sup> However, as far as this study is concerned, her remarks about art photographers are important. Rosler points out '*that art photography defines itself by stressing its distance from the recording apparatus*' and she further explains, '*it often does so by relying on arcane theories of vision and on manipulation of the print, more recently on conceptual*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>66</sup> Rosler 1989.

<sup>67</sup> See also Chapter I page 2-3; Rosler briefly outlines the origins of photomontage, referring to the Dadaists and John Heartfield, see also Chapter III.

<sup>68</sup> Rosler 1989.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

*or critical-theoretical grounding.*<sup>70</sup> These aspects can be observed in some of the methods and approaches of the photographers discussed in the study and which will be outlined in the following chapters.

In view of the literature about the influence of digital technology and culture on photography, in particular by Ritchin, Batchen, Hubertus von Amelnunxen, Peter Lunenfeld as well as Mitchell, and with regard to Rosler's view on pre-digital manipulation, I would like to define the terminology used in order to stay within the remit of this thesis which first and foremost examines art photography.<sup>71</sup>

Firstly, I should like to clarify how I intend to use the terms 'digital technique' and 'digital technology' in this thesis. In the majority of cases, the terms refer to the digital conversion of an analogue photograph into a digital image or digital file which is then stored on a computer, where it can be revised with picture-processing programs. Accordingly, the term 'digital photograph' or 'digital image' refers to a picture that consists of coded binary data and does not necessarily or exclusively refer to an image that originates from a digital camera. A 'digital photograph' or 'digital image', in other words, can originate from a range of sources: it can be an image produced with a digital camera or through a digital scanning device or indeed through an analogue photograph which is subsequently converted into a digital file.

Secondly, I should like to explain what is generally understood by the term 'hybrid approach'. This is defined by the production of an analogue photograph, often with a view camera; the negatives of this process are then scanned and transformed into a digital image/digital file, which offers the possibility of revision or manipulation pixel by pixel at the computer screen. The digital file is then used to produce another negative that can be printed using conventional darkroom techniques, which also allow manipulation and/or control of contrast, tone and colour in a conventional way.

Although many, if not most, of the artists examined in this thesis use a 'hybrid approach', i.e. the above-mentioned conversion of analogue photographs into images that exist purely as coded binary data, it is not possible to exclude at least the possibility of their using a digital camera in their artistic work. This is why the above definition of the terms 'digital photograph' and 'digital image' has to remain somewhat 'elastic'.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> See Ritchin 2009; Batchen 1997; Amelnunxen 1996; Lunenfeld 1996; Mitchell 1992; Rosler 1989.

Given the above, I would prefer to refrain as far as possible from entering into a debate about a '*post-photographic era*' as suggested for example by Lunenfeld<sup>72</sup> or Mitchell.<sup>73</sup> Such a debate would make sense only if an image were purely electronic and digital in origin. What I would like to do instead is to discuss the problem of the '*indexical link*', in which regard the theoretical writings of Charles Sanders Peirce<sup>74</sup>, Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes are important.<sup>75</sup> The indexical link refers originally to the analogue photograph that by definition is the result of a photochemical process. It also offers the possibility of a depiction which resembles the originally presented object in front of the camera. Such a photograph would offer an indexical link to the depicted object. However, as already explained, some of the photographers examined here use a hybrid approach in their work; it will therefore be necessary to investigate how this impacts on the indexical sign of their photographs.

In addition to these introductory remarks about the historical and theoretical background and parameters, I want to outline how I would like to conduct this study and what the principle contributions of this thesis are.

Through visiting a lecture series about the German art historian and cultural theorist Aby (Abraham Moritz) Warburg (1866-1929), I became familiar with aspects of his work. By taking a distinctly historical approach, Warburg suggested that every artistic production has its origins in old imageries and traditional forms.<sup>76</sup> Art histories' reoccurring forms and formal vocabulary have always attracted artists. By tracing them in an artwork, we can enhance our understanding about the origins of these forms and gain a better understanding about their art historical development. Gursky agrees that such a general language of imagery exists: '*As I have already said in interviews, the*

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<sup>72</sup> Lunenfeld 1996.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchell 1992.

<sup>74</sup> Writing about Peirce's work, Batchen remarks that '*those who look to Peirce for pragmatic evidence of an extra-photographic real, the thing-itself, the generative source of the indexical signing that is the photographic process, will, if they look closely enough, find "nothing but signs" [...] we must logically include the real as but one more form of the photographic.*' Batchen concludes with regard to Peirce and also Derrida that '*[...] we must regard photography as the representation of a reality that is itself nothing but a play of representation.*' See Batchen 1997, 198. Batchen's hypothesis would mean that there is no reality, only different modi of representations which would make an in-depth discussion about the indexical link obsolete. This study will therefore remain within the parameters of the classical debate (Peirce, Bourdieu, Barthes) about the indexical link as outlined above.

<sup>75</sup> Kloesel (ed.) 1986; Bourdieu (ed.) 1970; Barthes 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Michels 2007.

*history of art seems to possess a generally valid formal vocabulary which we use again and again. It would perhaps be interesting for you art historians to find out why an artist who is not versed in your subject such as myself still has access to this formal vocabulary.*<sup>77</sup> That is why Warburg based his art historical assessment and comparison on a thoroughly descriptive investigation and combined it with iconographical and iconological methods to provide for a more extensive analysis of the artwork.<sup>78</sup> He was also very much in favour of an interdisciplinary approach by using a variety of sources for his art historical research, for example classical literature, contemporary coins, medals or medieval wall paintings, a fact that enabled him to include the examined art work in a more broader cultural history.

In this study, I will be applying Warburg's approach to a considerable extent. The main virtues of such an interdisciplinary method are in my view the inclusion of the investigated photographic oeuvres into a broader cultural context. This should be done, firstly, through an art-historical analysis which should not only try to provide a detailed descriptive examination before interpreting the subject matter, but by allowing a comparison of the work of Gursky and Wall with that of other photographers<sup>79</sup>; it also aims to relate their photographs to a wide range of art genres like painting, sculpture and installation and thus tries to connect them to the work of other artists.

Secondly, the art historical analysis is enhanced through the inclusion of a variety of sources on the history and theory of photography, art history and philosophy. It is also notable that neither the art genres nor the theoretical sources are subject to any temporal restrictions. This shall enable me to investigate and trace reoccurring forms and formal vocabulary used by these artists and gain an understanding about their origins as a way of providing a more complete cultural analysis.

Thirdly, given that the photographic medium relies heavily on technical developments which have influenced the presentation (style, composition, size) and production process of photographs, I feel that it is paramount to examine preliminary processes, in particular the planning stage and the production process of photographs.

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<sup>77</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Heitmann 2007, 5-6, 14-16.

<sup>79</sup> This approach follows Erwin Panofsky's '*Ikonomisches drei Stufen Schema*' (iconological model of three steps): a pre-iconographical analysis describes what is depicted, an iconographical analysis explains how it is depicted and finally, the iconological interpretation investigates its meaning. See also Panofsky 1995. In some of the existing literature parts of Panofsky's model of interpretation are used, intentionally or not (Gronert, Galassi, Burnett, Wagstaff, Fried). The aim is to arrive at a more complete interpretation of the art works by following Panofsky's idea more strictly.



The aim then is to understand not only how the photographic medium has changed over time but also the role which digital technology has played in that change, without exclusively focusing on the visible photographic surface.

To summarize, Warburg's method should be translated into a thorough investigation which includes an art historical and technical assessment and the inclusion of specific sources. The aim is to substantiate Warburg's thesis that every artistic production has its origins in old imageries and traditional forms and concepts with regard to contemporary and post-modern photography and by doing so, the present study aims to achieve the inclusion of these photographic oeuvres into a broader cultural history context. Given that Warburg's approach has not – at least as far as could be ascertained – been used in conjunction with contemporary and post-modern photography, I hope to achieve new insights for the field of art history.

The other original insight of the thesis would like to offer is an investigation and comparison of the oeuvre of Gursky and Wall and their respective 'schools'. After a detailed introduction to the oeuvre of both artists, the study analyses their work in relation to their biographical background and artistic development, with a particular focus on their formative academic environments, their fellow students and teachers. By looking at the role of their teachers, the thesis aims to establish whether education and training has left a visible mark on the work of their students. By investigating and comparing the *Düsseldorf School* and '*Vancouver School*', I hope to evaluate similarities and differences in the production process and artistic styles of their art. This serves as a precondition to identify common elements but also to document the diversity of approaches and works we encounter. Given that both 'schools' were established during the 1970s, at a time when the photographic medium enter the world of fine art, thus heralding a paradigm shift in the field of photography more generally, I was interested whether a transatlantic connection between these artistic movements could be identified. The available literature on this subject is far from extensive and both 'schools' have rarely, if ever, been studied in conjunction or in comparison with one another. What is more, the students having been associated and trained in these schools have, more often than not, been looked at in isolation. For example, the Düsseldorf school is examined in Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule. Photographien 1961-2008 by Lothar Schirmer and Stefan Gronert 2009. The book uses an encyclopedic approach and investigates three subject areas: firstly, the artists in Düsseldorf in the 1960s and 1970s who laid the foundations for art photography in Germany. Secondly, it looks at the Bechers and their students. And thirdly, the book offers an assesment of the environment of the Art Academy in Düsseldorf. I felt it was necessary to adopt a similar approach to provide a thorough investigation of both schools which could later

be used to compare both movements. The study therefore looks, firstly, at the artistic foundations of Vancouver and Düsseldorf, secondly at the relationship between teacher and mentor and thirdly, investigates their academic and cultural environment. The remaining literature, on the other hand, is limited to examining individual Düsseldorf students, for example by Galassi and Fried.<sup>80</sup> As already mentioned, Sommer analysis the oeuvre of Gursky, Höfer, Hütte, Ruff, Struth, and Steinhauser and Derenthal look at architectural aspects in the work of Gursky, Ruff and Struth.<sup>81</sup> Uwe Schneede examines in his exhibition catalogue Axel Hütte. Italien the Italian landscape and architectural photographs of Axel Hütte.<sup>82</sup>

With regard to the Vancouver students, Marsha Lederman examines in her article '*Behind the Lens: The Vancouver School Debate*' the use of the term '*Vancouver school*'<sup>83</sup> while Dieter Roelstrate and Scott Watson look in their exhibition catalogue *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists* in detail at the contemporary art scene in Vancouver from the 1960s onwards, including Douglas, Graham, Lum, Wall, Wallace and Arden as well as other Vancouver artists.<sup>84</sup> In addition, the Vancouver students, not unlike their counterparts in Düsseldorf, are generally examined in isolation and unconnected from each other, for example the articles by Vince Aletti and Jonathan Mack only look at Stan Douglas work.<sup>85</sup>

Wall, on the other hand, not unsurprisingly, is the only Vancouver student whose work has really been comprehensively examined, for example by Burnett and Lauter.<sup>86</sup> Arthur Lubow, in his article '*The Luminist*', not only reveals important details about Wall's private life but also attempts to assess the relationship with his mentor Wallace.<sup>87</sup> Peggy Gale also examined Wall and Wallace in her article '*Outsiders In: West-Coast Perspectives from Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace*'.<sup>88</sup> The Vancouver students have also written about their own or about each others work, for example Roy Arden wrote about his work in his article '*Fragments*'<sup>89</sup> and published an article entitled '*Tabula Nova*'. A

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<sup>80</sup> See Galassi 2003 and Fried 2008.

<sup>81</sup> See Sommer 2002 and Steinhauser/Derenthal 2000

<sup>82</sup> Schneede 1993.

<sup>83</sup> Lederman 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Roelstrate/Watson 2005.

<sup>85</sup> See Aletti 2011 and Mack 2011.

<sup>86</sup> See Burnett 2005a and Lauter 2001

<sup>87</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Gale 1987.

<sup>89</sup> Arden 2002.

Personal Account of the Nova Gallery' where Wall first exhibited his back-lit box '*The Destroyed Room*' (1978).<sup>90</sup> Wall and Arden also jointly published the article '*La Photographie d'art, expression parfaite du reportage, The Dignity of the Photograph*'.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, Wall published essays on the work of all members of the group, though not about Stan Douglas. For example, he wrote an essay about Rodney Graham's work '*Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham's Work*' for the latter solo exhibition at Vancouver Art Gallery in 1988.<sup>92</sup> In 1990, he published '*Four Essays on Ken Lum*' and, three years later, an article entitled '*An Artist and his Model*' for Roy Arden's solo exhibition at Vancouver's Art Gallery.<sup>93</sup> Most of these articles contain useful information to construct a more complete and nuanced picture about this collaborative group of Vancouver artists, although a more extensive monograph still needs to be published.

What is also notable here is that both artistic movements have never been examined in conjunction to one another. Although the reasons for this omission are difficult to establish with certainty, it is quite possible that the geographical location of both 'school' on two different continents – separated by some thousands of miles of ocean – may have contributed to a lack of unifying focus among scholars interested in this subject area in the past. However, some links between Düsseldorf and Vancouver have existed in the past. For example, the German curator Kaspar König, organiser of the 1981 '*Westkunst*' exhibition in Cologne, which included works by Wall and Wallace, established an exchange programme for visiting artists at Düsseldorf's Art Academy. König invited Wall to Düsseldorf and introduced him to Gursky. Another reason for jointly investigating Düsseldorf and Vancouver is the fact that both movements were established between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, both spanning a bridge between photography and conceptual art. An investigation of the oeuvres of the students of the Vancouver and Düsseldorf school will allow us to identify and evaluate influential elements, and document the similarities and diversity of approaches and works we encounter, a gap that this study likes to fill.

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<sup>90</sup> Arden 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Arden/Wall 1999.

<sup>92</sup> Wall 2007c.

<sup>93</sup> See Wall 1990 and Wall 1993.

The thesis comprises six chapters. This chapter (Chapter I, Introduction: What Happened to Baudelaire's 'Secretary'? The Role of Digital Technology in Contemporary Photography) provides an introduction. Chapter II, Oscillating between *Urmalerei* and *Urphotographie*: Gursky's Journey from Analogue to Digital, examines the oeuvre of the German photographer Andreas Gursky. The exhibition catalogue about Andreas Gursky by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of the Department of Photography of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is essential to this chapter, as he has pointed out several antagonistic elements that are united in Gursky's oeuvre.<sup>94</sup> I therefore focus on explaining how they came about and try to provide a better understanding of the complexities of his photographs.

The chapter also investigates Gursky's use of analogue and digital photography in detail by locating his work in a biographical narrative. Through a number of representative case studies, I hope to demonstrate the gradual changes in his production process, and how the use of digital technique and advanced printing technologies affected the production process, size and composition of his images.

I try to analyse recurrent elements in Gursky's oeuvre as well as his preference for certain forms of subject matter. In addition, I want to compare his analogue and digital composition in order to establish whether it has affected style and composition, in particular in regard to Otto Steinert's concept of subjective photography and Bernd and Hilla Becher's strict method of serial photography.

Furthermore, the chapter endeavours to establish elements that distinguish Gursky's images and work processes from, and unite them with, those of other artists utilizing photography or practices that relate to photography, such as for example Gerhard Richter. More broadly the chapter explores the philosophical and aesthetic concepts which underpin Gursky's artistic work, and critically investigates his oeuvre within the art-historical context.

Chapter III, Images of Our Time: Jeff Wall, 'a *Painter of Modern Life*', attempts to chart Wall's journey from art history student to internationally recognized photographer. Jeff Wall's '*Selected Essays and Interviews*' have been a crucial source for this chapter, given that the book reveals, among other things, the importance and influence of Charles Baudelaire in Wall's oeuvre.<sup>95</sup> I therefore try to investigate how Wall modified and utilized Baudelaire's concept of '*the Painter of Modern Life*' in his work and to contextualize his interest in Baudelaire and his writings during the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> A

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<sup>94</sup> Galassi 2003.

<sup>95</sup> Wall 2007a.

<sup>96</sup> Mayne (ed.) 1964.

particular focus is placed on Eugène Delacroix, who not only knew Baudelaire, but whose painting '*The Death of Sardanapalus*' (1827-28) served as a pictorial model for Wall's first lightbox photograph, '*The Destroyed Room*' (1978).

The chapter also examines how Wall conceived the idea of presenting his images as transparencies in lightboxes and why he divides his work into three categories: '*cinematographic*', '*near-documentary*' and '*documentary*' photographs. I also investigate how these categories are produced and try to contextualize this information in regard to the history and theory of photography. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the movements of pictorial and straight photography and to investigate whether Henri Cartier-Bresson's '*decisive moment*'<sup>97</sup> has any meaning in Wall's oeuvre. This is attempted by looking at one of Wall's best-known photographs, '*Mimic*' (1982), which in addition is analysed with reference to the writings of the German philologist Erich Auerbach.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, the chapter analyses the literary and pictorial models for Wall's compositions focusing in particular on Ralph Ellison's novel '*Invisible Man*' and paintings by Delacroix, Diego Velázquez and Manet. Finally, I investigate some of Wall's digital compositions, focusing on their genesis and on any art-historical references. I also look closely at the changes and possibilities which came about through the use of digital techniques, and their influence on composition and style. This analysis is supported by reference to the theoretical writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes.<sup>99</sup>

In Chapter IV, Photographic Nuances and Variations: Contemporary Photographers in Düsseldorf and Vancouver, after my detailed introduction to the oeuvre of Gursky and Wall, I provide an investigation of the formative academic environments of these artists and take a closer look at their academic institutions and how much these artists have been influenced by their surroundings.

Firstly, I investigate the terms '*Düsseldorf School*' and '*Vancouver School*' and the problems that arise from their use. I then proceed with an examination of Gursky's teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher and Wall's mentor Ian Wallace and try to establish whether the education and training they provided has left a visible mark on the work of their students. I look at their curricula vitae and how their own development affected their teaching methods and therefore influenced their students, as well as examining some of their artwork. The chapter also looks at the oeuvre of Gursky's and Wall's

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<sup>97</sup> Cartier-Bresson 2006, 78.

<sup>98</sup> Auerbach 2003.

<sup>99</sup> Kloesel (ed.) 1986; Bourdieu (ed.) 1970; Barthes 2008.

fellow students and analyses selected photographs in order to identify influential elements and document the diversity of approaches and works we encounter.

In regard to the Bechers' other students, the chapter examines works of Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Axel Hütte and Thomas Ruff. The main criterion for the selection of these students was their joint attendance with Andreas Gursky at classes given by the Bechers. In particular, I focus on Thomas Ruff, given that he is the only student, other than Gursky, to utilize digital techniques and a computer in his work. Regarding these works, I try to provide information about their production and origins. Ruff's portrait series, which gained international recognition, is examined in detail: on the one hand in regard to its influence on the other students and, on the other, in relation to the work of Gerhard Richter.

In relation to Wall's fellow students, I examine the work of Roy Arden, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham. These artists were selected on the basis that either they were friends of Wall or that they studied with Wallace and Wall at some point. This section tries to give an overview over the highly diverse oeuvre of these artists. Finally, the chapter attempts to compare the Düsseldorf and Vancouver students in order to evaluate similarities and differences.

Chapter V, Suspense or Surprise: At the Interface between Photographic Images and Film Stills, tries to determine the impact of the film genre on the photographs of Gursky and Wall. The chapter investigates whether film or film stills have been an inspiring source for these photographers; it therefore examines both genres in particular where they share common characteristics regarding techniques and iconography. Additionally, it aims to address and analyse similar and comparable aesthetic and stylistic elements in the oeuvre of photographers like Gursky, Wall, and Douglas that originate from film design and composition.

I therefore analyse some selected examples of Gursky's photographs of urban buildings in comparison with the architecture displayed in Fritz Lang's science fiction film *'Metropolis'* (1927). Further focus is placed on Wall's photograph *'Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994'* (1994), based on the short story *'Die Sorge des Hausvaters'* (*The Cares of a Family Man*) (1919) by Franz Kafka. I try to investigate the influence of *film noir* on this particular photograph, as well as the meaning of the depiction of motion as a still image by looking at the work of Eadweard Muybridge, Marcel Duchamp and Richter.

I also examine the works of the Vancouver artist Stan Douglas exclusively in this chapter, given that the way he produces some of his photographs very much relate to the production process of film. In addition, he produces films and video installations. This section looks in particular at the image *'Abbot & Cordova, 7 August 1971'* (2008)

and the films '*Klatsassin*' and '*Der Sandmann*', based on the novel of the same title by E.T.A. Hoffmann which later would inspire Sigmund Freud's essay '*The Uncanny*' (1919). In all three cases I try to examine the production processes and aim to contextualize them by investigating the historical, art-historical and philosophical background.

Chapter VI provides a conclusion and a brief outlook in regard to the photographic medium.

## **II. Oscillating between *Urmalerei* and *Urphotographie*:<sup>100</sup>**

### **Gursky's Journey from Analogue to Digital**

#### **1. No Place for the Pictorially Illiterate**

The German photographer Andreas Gursky<sup>101</sup> is best known for his often colourful large-scale photographs which are concerned with '*the examination of the visible world*'.<sup>102</sup> Gursky examines spaces and structures which humans have constructed; he observes intersections between human beings and their surroundings; he explores their living and working conditions and their locations of leisure and consumption all over the world and in great detail, all in his pursuit of photographing an '*encyclopaedia of life*'.<sup>103</sup>

His photographs document the clear similarities of our global civilization caused by an inevitable breakdown of cultural boundaries resulting from economic interdependency and the homogeneity of modern societies. According to the anthropologist David Harvey, the process of globalization is not new: '*Certainly from 1492 onwards, and even before (cf. the Hanseatic League system), the globalization of capitalism was*

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<sup>100</sup> 'If Richter's gray paintings are a form of *Urmalerei*, an essence of painting, Gursky's carpet picture is an equally reductive form of *Urphotographie*': Galassi 2003, 33.

<sup>101</sup> Andreas Gursky (b. 1955) lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany. He attended the Folkwangschule in Essen in 1977-80, where he studied visual communication with Otto Steinert (1915-78) and Michael Schmidt (b. 1945). In the following year, Gursky entered the Art Academy in Düsseldorf and attended the class of Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934), from which he graduated as a '*Meisterschüler*' in 1987. During his time at the Academy he made the acquaintance of Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), who taught painting in Düsseldorf 1971-93. Gursky was also introduced to Jeff Wall (b. 1946) through the well-known curator Kasper König (b. 1943). Gursky is best known for large-scale photographs which often depict their subject matter from an elevated position. His photographs are frequently concerned with our global world and how humans exist in it, and depict architectural sites and landscapes as well as masses of people. In 2010 Gursky was offered a professorship in fine arts at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, following in the footsteps of Bernd Becher, Jeff Wall and Thomas Ruff (b. 1958), a fellow student of Becher.

<sup>102</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Meister 2001.



*well under way in part through the production of a network of urban places*'.<sup>104</sup> However, Harvey also pointed out: *'In the last twenty years, the rhetoric of "globalization" has become particularly important, even replacing within segments of radical thought the more politicised concepts of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. The ideological effect of this discursive shift has been extraordinarily disempowering with respect to all forms of local, urban, and even national political action*'.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, in a global society individuals are often pressured into more subordinate roles, a theme represented and taken up by Gursky in his global images. Sometimes it seems that human beings provide the observer with little more than a point of reference about the proportion and scale of the depicted subject matter. Gursky's images are characterized by a detached and unconcerned view of the chosen subjects, which seem to appear in the simple, straightforward manner associated with the tradition of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>106</sup>

However, Gursky's oeuvre is not only influenced by his own artistic and stylistic developments; it is also driven by technological innovations and improvements in photography. In 1986, Gursky followed Thomas Ruff's example and changed from conventionally sized to large-scale images, taking advantage of the newly developed print techniques for over-scale images and professional lab facilities of the Grieger Print Company in Düsseldorf, which had previously been used exclusively by the advertising industry. In 1990, Gursky began to include a computer in his work process. Still shooting analogue, he used a hybrid approach and scanned his images in order to be able eventually to revise them pixel by pixel, later printing them in his darkroom. From this point he began to work with digital techniques more regularly, at first only as a retouching tool and later to manipulate the whole composition. In 2008, he went one step further and started to generate and construct whole images using software.

With new technical possibilities like digital cameras and print techniques and software Gursky's photographs underwent a profound change from documentary in the 1980s to complex pictorial arrangements in 2008. His work is in essence the material realization of some of the concerns the artist and lecturer at the Dessauer Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy, expressed in his essay *'Fotografie ist Lichtgestaltung* [*Photography is Light Creation*'] in 1928, stating that the illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read and write; it will be someone who is unacquainted with

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<sup>104</sup> Harvey 2000, 32-33.

<sup>105</sup> Harvey 2000, 32-33.

<sup>106</sup> See page 34.

photography.<sup>107</sup> In the mid-1920s, Moholy-Nagy had followed with great interest the changes in photojournalism that emerged from the invention of light and flexible miniature cameras, which now offered the possibilities of shooting at night and of close-ups.<sup>108</sup> In Moholy-Nagy's vision the boundaries of the photographic medium were unpredictable, in view of inevitable technical developments that would pave the way for more creative power.<sup>109</sup> His prognosis, to the effect that the ability to interpret photographic images would not be able to keep up with fast-changing technical improvements within the photographic medium, proved to be true in particular in relation to the digital era, as the new technology offered endless possibilities for depicting subject matter that exceeded visible reality. A general understanding of imagery and perception of digitally manipulated photographs can therefore not be assumed, as the following analysis will show.

Gursky's work has been described, analysed and praised by curators, art historians and critics all over the world, who have offered explanations for the origins and value of his work.<sup>110</sup> In 2001, Gursky exhibited his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York with the help of Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of the Department of Photography, who summarized Gursky's work as follows: *'Documentary realism versus digital manipulation, modernist idealism versus postmodern skepticism, high art versus commerce, conceptual rigor versus spontaneous observation, photography versus painting: these and other antagonisms have engendered some fierce battles, but for*

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<sup>107</sup> Moholy-Nagy 1928. Moholy-Nagy's statement became more widely known when Walter Benjamin quoted it in his *'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie'*: Benjamin 1977a.

<sup>108</sup> There were mainly three new miniature cameras: Leica (1924), Ermanox (1925) and Rolleiflex (1929). See further: Brüning 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Moholy-Nagy 1928.

<sup>110</sup> König 1992, Felix 1994, Görner 1998, Syring 1998, Steinhäuser/ Derenthal 2000, Sommer 2002, Galassi 2003, Campany 2004, Diers 2006, Weski 2007, Zimmer/Werthemann 2007, Fried 2008, Schirmer/Gronert 2009. On the international art market Gursky's images achieve astronomical prices at auction. In 2001, his work *'Untitled V'* (1997) was sold for over €700,000 at Christie's in London. During the auction, the estimated value of the image doubled. At the time, it was an extraordinary amount of money for a photographic image – which shows 204 sports shoes on a six-storeyed shelf – and reflected the trend during the 1990s for contemporary photographs to become valuable and highly collectable items and museum pieces. Gursky's artistic recognition was crowned by several important exhibitions all over the world. On 7<sup>th</sup> February 2007, his image *'99 Cent'* (1999) was sold for US\$3.34 million at auction at Sotheby's in New York, a record sum at the time, which made Gursky the most expensive and collectable contemporary photographer in the world: Kliemann 2001; Nikolaus 2007.

*Gursky they are all givens – not opponents but companions. Much of the grace of his art and still more of its contemporary torque derive from the agility with which it accommodates a wealth of apparent polarities.*<sup>111</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to examine Gursky's work and to explain why it unites Galassi's enumeration of antagonistic elements, to provide a better understanding of the complexities of his images, and to examine and explore the ambiguous clarity of his subject matter. Furthermore, the chapter will endeavour to establish elements that distinguish Gursky's images and work processes from those of other artists and consider them together. Additionally, it will focus on how the use of digital technology has changed his work process and influenced his method of composition.

## **2. Gursky's Conglomerate of Influences: Subjective Objectivities**

Gursky's images unite the technical perfection of photographic craftsmanship with an enumeration of antagonistic elements that originate from art-historical sources, relate to practices of the advertising industry, and have their roots in conceptual art. In order to understand the diversity of stylistic elements which seem to be effortlessly combined in his work it is necessary to examine in detail some of the main influences on Gursky's career.

An important formative influence was his family, a dynasty of photographers. The only child of Rosemarie and Willy Gursky, he came into contact with photography from an early age. His grandfather Hans (1890-1960) was a well-established portrait and commercial photographer in Taucha, Leipzig, who became leader of the photography guild in Saxony (*Landesobermeister des Landesinnungsverbandes Sachsen*). His father Willy (b. 1921) worked as a commercial photographer in Leipzig from 1949. He fled from East Germany to the West with his family in 1955. Willy Gursky contacted an uncle who worked for the Krupp company in Essen; he feigned a commission that allowed Willy to travel to West Germany with his camera equipment. A few days later he sent a birthday telegram to his wife as a sign for her to take the train to the West and to distract the authorities from her forthcoming escape plans. On 30<sup>th</sup> December 1955, Rosemarie took the train to West Germany together with Andreas in a pram and the family dog.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Galassi 2003, 41.

<sup>112</sup> Meister 2010.

The family quickly settled in the West and Willy Gursky opened a studio near Düsseldorf in the Ruhrgebiet, the industrial heartland of post-war Germany. Originally rich in coal, steel and iron and with a well-developed infrastructure, the area attracted other branches of industry and manufacture. With Germany flourishing during the so-called '*Wirtschaftswunder*' from the 1950s onwards, advertising and commercial photography became an expanding industry that settled close to its potential customers in the Ruhrgebiet. Willy Gursky became a well-known commercial photographer alongside Charles Wilp and Franz Christian Gundlach. He depicted the '*Wirtschaftswunder*' in all its facets: advertisements for Henkel's washing powder and Stollwerck's chocolate were followed by portraits of the celebrities of the time and three-year-old Andreas Gursky posing in an advertisement for König's lager.

For a few years Andreas worked with his father in their studio learning all the technical tricks of the trade. He once mentioned in an interview that he was not taught much about photographic techniques either at the Folkwangschule or at the Düsseldorf Academy; instead he would ask his father for advice and profited from the times when he assisted him at his studio. As well as working as a commercial photographer, Willy Gursky had studied at the Art Academy in Leipzig during the war, where he became particularly interested in the importance of light in painting and what he called '*the one-sided Rembrandt light*'.<sup>113</sup> Andreas Gursky particularly valued his father's advice about light arrangement and perspective.<sup>114</sup>

But Gursky was keen to find his own way in photography and this urge made him join the Folkwangschule in Essen in 1977. Founded by Otto Steinert, the figurehead of German *Subjektive Fotografie* (Subjective Photography), the Folkwangschule offered training for professional photographers in advertising, illustration and photojournalism. Gursky studied visual communication and financed his degree through work as a taxi driver<sup>115</sup> and commercial photographer for companies like Osram and Thompson.<sup>116</sup> While studying at the Folkwangschule Gursky had only a brief acquaintance with Steinert, who died in 1978.<sup>117</sup> He therefore studied mainly with Michael Schmidt, a former policeman who was a self-taught photographer. Schmidt has shot exclusively in black and white since 1965, mostly with a serial approach, often documenting social circumstances and surroundings in a realistic and objective style

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Hakendahl 2010; Meister 2010.

<sup>115</sup> Holstein 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Galassi 2003, 22.

<sup>117</sup> Mißelbeck (ed.) 1996, 666-667.

far removed from Cartier-Bresson's concept of '*the decisive moment*'. This refers to a quotation by the Cardinal de Retz, Jean François Paul de Gondî, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who remarked: '*There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment.*'<sup>118</sup> In 1952, Cartier-Bresson quoted Cardinal de Retz in the preface of his book '*Images à la Sauvette*', the English edition of which was titled '*The Decisive Moment*'.<sup>119</sup> For Cartier-Bresson '*the decisive moment*' depicted the climax of a plot which represented the essence of the depicted event,<sup>120</sup> and his camera was therefore an '*instrument of intuition and spontaneity*'.<sup>121</sup> This explains his viewpoint that photography could never be like painting because '*there is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera.*'<sup>122</sup> Schmidt was fascinated by the American '*New Topography*'<sup>123</sup>, particularly by Robert Adams, whose influence can be seen in some of Schmidt's street photographs and cityscapes of his hometown Berlin which he depicted until the 1990s. His series '*Untitled, from Berlin-Wedding*' (1976-77),<sup>124</sup> for example, depicts blocks of flats in Wedding, one of Berlin's central areas, known for its working-class history. His cityscapes often focus on spaces which are not clearly defined by architecture or a particular location, like empty building plots or parking spaces. These images are frequently characterized by their plain objectivity with no decorative or narrative elements. Whether depicting houses, portraits or landscapes, his focus lies on the essentials of his subject matter, further underlined by his use of black and white photography.

While Schmidt was exploring working-class neighbourhoods in Berlin, Gursky, it seems, also became interested in the genre of street photography, judging by three photographs taken around 1979. Hardly any of Gursky's photographs while at the Folkwangschule have been published except for these three black and white images in

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<sup>118</sup> Cartier-Bresson 2006, 78: '*Il n'y a rien en ce monde qui n'ait un moment décisif.*'

<sup>119</sup> Both titles were inventions of the publishers. The French publisher Stratis Eleftherios Teriade invented the title '*Images à la Sauvette*' and the American publisher Dick Simon, co-founder of the publishing house Simon and Schuster, translated the title into '*The Decisive Moment*'. See also FAD 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Cartier-Bresson 2006, 78-82.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 83: '*Die Kamera ist für mich ein Skizzenbuch, ein Instrument der Intuition und der Spontaneität, der Meister des Augenblicks, der in der Sprache des Visuellen gleichzeitig fragt und entscheidet.*'

<sup>122</sup> Bernstein 2004.

<sup>123</sup> See also Chapter IV.

<sup>124</sup> Galassi 2003, 12-13.

Galassi's monograph;<sup>125</sup> these are influenced by American street photography as well as by Schmidt's take on social documentary. 'Unpublished (Schützenfest)' (c. 1979), for example, depicts a street scene with a couple on their way to a *Schützenfest*, a festival to crown the best rifleman; another photograph, 'Unpublished (Gran Canaria)' (c. 1979), depicts a plain view of a bus waiting near a pedestrian bridge on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria; and 'Unpublished (Paris)' (c. 1979) depicts a black man from behind wearing a bowler hat.<sup>126</sup>

When Gursky graduated from the Folkwangschule in 1980, he sought work, without success, as a photojournalist in Hamburg; he then followed the advice of his friend Thomas Struth and applied to the Düsseldorf Art Academy.<sup>127</sup> In the autumn of 1980, he began his studies in the class of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who already had a reputation for shaping and influencing contemporary art photography, or, as the curator Charlotte Cotton has remarked, '*the Bechers have been instrumental in rephrasing vernacular photography into highly considered artistic strategies, in part as a way of investigating art photography with visual and mental connections to history and the everyday.*'<sup>128</sup> Gursky began to approach his subject matter within their strict and determined concept of serial photography.

The aim of the Bechers was to depict their content with the utmost objectivity. This would be achieved through their vigorous and systematic work process, rooted in *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>129</sup> In the late 1920s German artists began to reject pictorial photography that tried to imitate post-Impressionism using soft-focus lenses and bromoil prints.<sup>130</sup> In

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Image No. 5, 'Unpublished (Paris)' (c. 1979), gelatine silver print; Image No. 6 'Unpublished (Gran Canaria)' (c. 1979), gelatine silver print; Image No. 7, 'Unpublished (Schützenfest)' (c. 1979), gelatine silver print.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>128</sup> Cotton 2004.

<sup>129</sup> See page 34..

<sup>130</sup> Baldwin 1991, 11-12: 'It [bromoil printing] depended on the underlying principle of lithography, namely, that oil and water repel each other. The process for producing a bromoil print began with a gelatine silver-bromide print, usually an enlargement from a smaller negative. This print was bleached in a solution of copper sulfate, potassium bromide, and potassium bichromate and then fixed in a solution of hyposulfite of soda ("hypo") and water. The visible image had disappeared and the gelatine had been hardened by the potassium bichromate in proportion to the amount of silver that comprised the image. The sheet, called a matrix, was soaked so that the gelatine would absorb water and was left damp. Lithographic ink or another greasy ink was then carefully and repeatedly dabbed onto the surface of the matrix with a

1927, László Moholy-Nagy wrote in his book *'Malerei, Fotografie, Film'* that photography could no longer follow in the steps of painting. According to him photography needed to work within its own rules and follow the principles of human vision; this would allow the camera to depict subject matters in a more objective and undisturbed way.<sup>131</sup> A new form of imagery gradually began to emerge. Labelled *Neues Sehen* or *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), it was marked by an attention to detail, an isolation of the subject matter and a reliance on photographic technique, originating from scientific forms of documentation. In their essay *'The Image of Objectivity'*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison explain that the actual concept of *'objectivity'*<sup>132</sup>, as we understand it today, was an invention of mid-nineteenth century science and *'is conceptually distinct from earlier attempts to be "true to nature" in its methods (mechanical), its morals (restrained), and its metaphysics (individualized).'*<sup>133</sup> Daston and Galison point out that nowhere was *'the precept of truth to nature'* more used *'than among scientific atlas makers'*, including different fields like anatomy, physiology, botany, paleontology, astronomy, X-rays and cloud-chamber physics.<sup>134</sup> These scientists believed, according to Daston and Galison, that their representations can *'be the closest possible rendering of what truly is'*.<sup>135</sup> In the late nineteenth century this new idea of scientific objectivity was summarized in the catchphrase *'Let nature speak for itself'*.<sup>136</sup> As Daston and Galison point out: *'At issue was not only accuracy but morality as well; the all-too-human scientists must, as a matter of duty, restrain themselves from*

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*special brush or gently applied with a rubber roller called a brayer. Where the gelatine absorbed water (in the highlights and, to a lesser degree, in the midtones), it repelled the oil-based ink. Repeated application of pigment gradually built up the matrix to whatever density was desired. The print thus created was either slowly dried or was used once in a press, while still wet, as a kind of printing plate to transfer the inked image to another surface. It is the combination of the original bromide print and the oil pigment that gives the bromoil print its name.'*

<sup>131</sup> Moholy-Nagy 1967.

<sup>132</sup> As Daston and Galison remark: *'Modern objectivity mixes rather than integrates disparate components, which are historically and conceptually distinct. Each of these components has its own history that explains how all of them came to be amalgamated into a single, if layered, concept. This layering accounts for the hopelessly but interestingly confused present usage of the term objectivity, which can be applied to everything from empirical reliability to procedural correctness to emotional detachment.'* Daston/Galison 1992, 82.

<sup>133</sup> Daston/Galison 1992, 84.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 81.

imposing their hopes, expectations, generalizations, aesthetics, even ordinary language on the image of nature. Where human self-discipline flagged, the machine would take over.<sup>137</sup> One of this 'machines' which would offer a 'noninterventionist', 'mechanical' and 'scientific' objectivity was the camera. A photograph began to be seen as the result of a mechanical device which excluded human interference and human subjectivity.<sup>138</sup>

With regard to the use of the term objectivity in science, we might say, that it stands for a value that determines how science is practiced and how scientific evidence is created. In order to produce scientific data or results which are reproducible and testable, it is necessary to exclude any sort of subjective decisions, emotional involvement or personal biases. *Neue Sachlichkeit* (adjective: *neu-sachlich*) and *Neues Sehen* are based on the idea of scientific objectivity. These terms, exclusively in regard to photography, and not painting, are often used synonymously, even though they define different photographic attitudes, in German art history at least. In *Neue Sachlichkeit* the photographer focuses on the object and tries to produce an image that excludes any form of subjectivity; s/he depicts his/her subject matter in the most 'objective' way possible. S/he uses only his/her camera to record the object. *Neues Sehen* refers to the process whereby the photographer uses the camera and how s/he looks at his object, how s/he actually ensures that s/he records his/her subject matter in the most objective way. *Neue Sachlichkeit* thus refers to the objectivity of the depiction of the subject matter and *Neues Sehen* refers to the photographer's approach, i.e. his/her objectivity in the manner of perceiving and recording the subject matter.<sup>139</sup> This approach, which I will explain in the following, can be seen in the work of the Bechers and their students, and even more so in the work of their predecessor Karl Blossfeldt.

The Bechers would shoot exclusively in series, in black and white, with a view camera and tripod from a slightly higher viewpoint than their object. Through these series of similar objects they visualized their formal and functional characteristics and made them comparable; thus they hoped to create an objective typology of architectural forms. In line with the tradition of *Neues Sehen* their depicted industrial buildings and architectures would become the objects of their aesthetic notions.

The Bechers' aim of objectivity in alliance with their strict work approach was just one building block of Steinert's theory of the possibilities of photographic creations. He distinguished between the technical sources of photography, which he called

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<sup>137</sup> Daston/Galison 1992, 81.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>139</sup> Honnef/Honnef-Harling (eds.) 2003, 60.



'*fotografische Gestaltungselemente*'<sup>140</sup> (photographic design elements), and the design possibilities of the photograph itself, which he called '*Vollendungsstufen fotografischen Schaffens*'<sup>141</sup> (finishing elements of photographic production). His aim was to exhaust not only the technical possibilities the photographic medium offered but also its design options in order to achieve creative and personal imageries which focused generally on a detailed depiction, a balanced composition, and the flow of lines and contrasts.<sup>142</sup> For Steinert '*objective photographs*' were '*an unachievable ideal*'.<sup>143</sup> In his view the term could refer only to imagery that tried to keep subjective interpretation and interference to a minimum, something the Bechers hoped to achieve through rigorous methodology. For photographs that were designed with the intention just of recording a subject with a photochemical process, Steinert favoured the term '*neutral photograph*' and categorized them as '*reproductive photographic depictions*'.<sup>144</sup> He made a distinction between '*Abbildung*' (depiction) and '*Gestaltung*' (creation). According to him the '*reproductive and interpretative photographic depiction*' mainly aims to record the object, with the latter term offering already a slightly personal interpretation by the photographer. Whereas the '*interpretative photographic creation*' sacrifices the recording of the realistic appearance of the subject matter in order to create an image that reflects purely the imagination of the photographer, '*the absolute photographic creation*' completely rejects a realistic depiction of the object for an abstract appearance of the object. For Steinert the composition should not exclusively present an expression of the photographer's view of his object, it should also be an essential condensation of the subject matter achieved in its highest form through abstract representation.<sup>145</sup>

Gursky's oeuvre is therefore influenced not only by Steinert's subjective photography but also by the Bechers' documentary approach. His work interweaves documentary assertion (from the Bechers) with meticulous composition (from Steinert),

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<sup>140</sup> Translated by the author from Steinert 2006, 85.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 88. Steinert refers here to the following terms: '*die vier Vollendungsstufen des fotografischen Schaffens*' (the four finishing elements of photographic production):

1. *die reproduktive fotografische Abbildung* (reproductive photographic representation)
2. *die darstellende fotografische Abbildung* (interpretative photographic representation)
3. *die darstellende fotografische Gestaltung* (interpretative photographic creation)
4. *die absolute fotografische Gestaltung* (absolute photographic creation)

and tries to condense the essence of his subject matter. He favours a strict pictorial order, something he would achieve from 1992 onwards, often with the help of digital techniques. The Bechers' and Steinert's approach might differ in their aim, but they were united in their pleading for a genuine photographic aesthetic that respected the possibilities and boundaries the photographic medium offered.

For Gursky these boundaries have broadened with technical developments that have taken place over the years; furthermore, he has become interested in challenging these boundaries, especially in his later work. An important inspiration to challenge the very nature of the photographic medium came with the work of Gerhard Richter, who taught the painting class at the Düsseldorf Academy from 1971 to 1993, while Gursky was studying there. Richter, who prefers to work in series, as in 'Grey' (1973) (Plate 1), often revisits single paintings or certain subject matters repeatedly, an approach familiar to Gursky, with his Becherian education. Gursky's photograph 'Untitled I' (1993) (Plate 2) of a grey carpet in the Kunsthalle at Düsseldorf has been compared by Galassi with Richter's series of grey paintings, concluding: '*Richter's grey paintings are a form of Urmalerei, an essence of painting, Gursky's carpet picture is an equally reductive form of Urphotographie.*'<sup>146</sup>

The artists' intentions for these works might have differed but the work approach and result offer an interesting comparison. At the beginning of the 1970s, Richter worked on a series of paintings which depicted various shades of grey. He later explained that he was depressed at the time and that in order to express his feelings he experimented with the colour grey. Having had another look at his finished paintings, he realized that each of them showed very individual characteristics. This discovery remotivated Richter and he was delighted to see slightly different aspects of idiosyncratic expression and variations of grey in each painting.<sup>147</sup>

Gursky had an altogether different intention in shooting his carpet picture. For one thing, he was not undergoing a personal crisis when he went to the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle to photograph visitors from the upper level of the gallery. Taking photographs from a bird's-eye perspective was something he had done several times before, but he never published any of the shots depicting the visitors. Instead he favoured a negative that depicted a close-up view of the grey gallery carpet.<sup>148</sup> Gursky admitted: '*I am perhaps more interested in the nature of things in general – again and*

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<sup>146</sup> Galassi 2003, 33.

<sup>147</sup> Storr 2002.

<sup>148</sup> Galassi 2003, 33.

again the term “aggregate state” comes to mind when I describe the existential state of things.<sup>149</sup>

In ‘*Untitled I*’ (1993) Gursky describes ‘*the aggregate state*’ of the grey gallery carpet, making a statement about the form and condition of the material when he reduces the depiction of the carpet to its abstract structure. ‘*Untitled I*’ (1993) became his first attempt to produce an image from which all narrative aspects had completely been erased; it was therefore a breakthrough for him.<sup>150</sup>

The photographic basis for investigating ‘*the aggregate state*’ of a subject matter was already laid by Steinert’s idea of the essential condensation of the depicted object and probably became even clearer for Gursky with the Bechers’ strict method of focusing on formal and functional characteristics of one’s subject matter. The pictorial idea of capturing the essence of a depicted object might result in a kind of ‘*Urform*’, as Galassi has suggested,<sup>151</sup> a kind of prototype that shows a general formal vocabulary which the spectator might identify as familiar, given his/her own memories of pictorial ideas.

An ‘*Urform*’, therefore, captures the essence of the depicted object, an idea that finds its origins in *Neue Sachlichkeit*, within which Blossfeldt’s scientific photographs of plants can be located. Although Blossfeldt took these photographs as material for his lectures as professor at the *Unterrichtsanstalt des Kunstgewerbemuseums* (School of the Arts and Crafts Museum), Berlin, without any artistic intention, his images were associated with the movement, and his strict guidelines for their depiction found their successors later in the work of the Bechers. In 1928, Blossfeldt published his detailed macro-photographs of plants in his book ‘*Urformen der Kunst*’. In his view, the depiction of an ‘*Urform*’ allowed the beholder the opportunity to focus on the multiplicity of different details and structures in nature and thus on the essence of a form, and in Blossfeldt’s particular case on the essence of a natural form.<sup>152</sup> Gursky’s photograph shows the essence of the abstract structure of that carpet and, in that sense, he achieves a similar result with his photographic work as does Richter with his painting ‘*Grey*’ (1973) by reducing it to the essence of its structure and colour. Perhaps this explains why the spectator is left with the superficial impression of a reminiscence of Richter’s painting. However, the appearance of their images is just one similarity among many.

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<sup>149</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>150</sup> Tomkins 2001.

<sup>151</sup> Galassi 2003, 33.

<sup>152</sup> Blossfeldt Archive n.d.

Even though a comparison of painting (Richter) and photograph (Gursky) might cause problems given their very different genesis, there are nevertheless interesting similarities in the work approach of these artists. Richter often establishes a relationship between his paintings and his photographs. A photographic image can be a trigger to start a painting; therefore he often takes a photograph in order to use it – literally speaking – as a canvas, and in that way challenges the depicted reality through the process of painting. In Richter's view the photographic image can be seen as 'a basis for a pictorial statement',<sup>153</sup> an approach rooted in the period of Pop Art, as the art historian Michel Frizot points out: '*Other 1960s artists [...] exploited the pigmentary multiplication of photography, often in the form of silk-screen prints, as the basis of their language of borrowings and linguistic deviation.*'<sup>154</sup>

Richter, whose work has to be seen in the Pop Art tradition, captures the appearance of a photographic surface in his paintings and therefore plays with the pictorial character of his depictions. In this sense, Gursky's work approach is comparable to that of Richter. Like Richter, he sometimes uses a photograph as a reference point or as the basis for another pictorial portrayal, as he once remarked: '*I have the ability to sort out the "valid" pictures from the images we are inundated with every day and have them ready for use when my intuition tells me the right moment has come, before mixing them with immediate visual experiences into an independent image.*'<sup>155</sup>

As with Richter's approach, it is Gursky's intention to emphasize certain aspects of his images. Both artists use the photographic image to question the depicted objectivity and reality of their subject matter. The main difference in Richter's work is that he often challenges the representation of reality in photographic images with a focus on political and social aspects, which is neither Gursky's main aim nor focus. However, the representation of the image is modified through painting (Richter), or by means of composition, perspective and/or digital manipulation (Gursky) to produce a specific condensation of reality.

Behind these artworks Gursky and Richter hold different views on the conceptions of their chosen medium. In an interview with the author and art critic Calvin Tomkins, Gursky remarked about the different genres in relation to his carpet image: '*Sure, it's a reference to Richter, but that was not my motivation. That's painting and this is*

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<sup>153</sup> Frizot 1998e.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 9.

*photography, and it's very important that you see this is photography – the texture, the way the light changes.*<sup>156</sup>

Gursky, in other words, wants to stay within the parameters of photography and painting. Richter, on the other hand, who started to work with photography and photographic images alongside his paintings at the beginning of the 1960s, has to be located between different representational techniques and media. In the catalogue for the Biennale in Venice in 1972, Richter wrote that it was not his intention to imitate a photographic image. In his view a photographic image was not exclusively a piece of paper that was exposed to light. His aim was to produce photographic images in another way, and not images that are similar to photographs, as he pointed out: *'It is not a question of imitating a photograph. I want to actually make a photograph. And because I want to go beyond the idea of photography conceived merely as a piece of light-sensitive paper, I make photographs with other means – not just pictures which are derived from photographs'*, concluding that *'the same holds true for pictures (abstracts, etc.) which, without a photographic model, produce photographs'*.<sup>157</sup> For Richter there is no distinction between the medium and the technology. The result will always be an image from an image.

Gursky's conception of his images is closely confined within the boundaries of photography. On the one hand, he wants the viewer to look at his photographs as ordinary photographs within the culture and context of photography; on the other, some of his images do not exist in reality and are digitally constructed and this, we might say, is where he comes close, maybe unintentionally, to Richter's conception.<sup>158</sup> Gursky once stated that it is his aim *'to destroy the pictorial character of photography'*;<sup>159</sup> his digitally manipulated work in particular succeeds in doing so. The pictorial character of these photographs is destroyed, given that the subject matter no longer refers to any existing objects, and is detached from time. They become images that have lost their indexical sign and are now self-referential pictures, like paintings.

One last important influence that needs to be addressed here is what might be called the patrimony of art and art history. By looking back into the past, Aby Warburg showed in his research that every artistic production has its origins in old imageries and

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<sup>156</sup> Tomkins 2001.

<sup>157</sup> Richter 1972.

<sup>158</sup> Galassi 2003, 39.

<sup>159</sup> Gursky explained his view during a conversation with artists at the *'Grosse Illusionen: Demand, Gursky, Ruscha'* exhibition (July 1999, Kunstmuseum, Bonn), printed in: Weckesser 2000.

traditional forms.<sup>160</sup> Gursky agrees that such a general language of imagery exists: *'As I have already said in interviews, the history of art seems to possess a generally valid formal vocabulary which we use again and again. It would perhaps be interesting for you art historians to find out why an artist who is not versed in your subject such as myself still has access to this formal vocabulary.'*<sup>161</sup>

Gursky's work has therefore to be seen in a broader context of art production and art history and, unsurprisingly, similarities of his work to other art forms have been recognized; for example his image *'Autobahn Mettmann'* (1993) (Plate 3) has been compared stylistically with landscape paintings by Gustave Courbet or conceptual paintings by Daniel Buren.<sup>162</sup> *'Autobahn Mettmann'* has been described by Peter Galassi as a *'cultural overlay, in which pristine aluminium strips reminiscent of a Donald Judd stack have been superimposed upon a painterly field animated by brushstroke grass and an artfully asymmetrical arrangement of cows borrowed from Claude Lorrain or [John] Constable.'*<sup>163</sup> The horizontal strips that occur in *'Rhine II'* (1999), *'Prada II'* (1997) and *'Paris, Montparnasse'* (1993) have been related to *'the all-over compositions of colour-field paintings'*<sup>164</sup> of abstract expressionists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.<sup>165</sup> Gursky's photograph of a carpet, discussed above, is about as close as a descriptive photograph can come to the bold reductions of Minimal art or monochrome painting, as David Campany explained.<sup>166</sup>

Art history does indeed offer a *'valid formal vocabulary'*<sup>167</sup> and shows generally that existing ideas and models have always been used and newly reinvented. Gursky's work bears resemblances to painting, sometimes to sculpture, and he benefits from known compositional techniques and content. For him, it comes as no surprise that

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<sup>160</sup> Michels 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>162</sup> *'Die Fotografie Mettmann, aufgenommen durch die von geätzten Lamellen durchzogene Scheibe einer Autobahnbrücke, bringt es fertig bildzerschneidende, montageartige Streifen à la Buren und eine kugelartige gewölbte Wiesenlandschaft à la Courbet als Bildeinheit plausibel erscheinen zu lassen'*: Schmitz 1994, 14.

<sup>163</sup> Galassi compares Gursky's images with several different art forms, but is however highly critical of an essay by Carter Ratcliff, which denounces Gursky's work as shallow *'picture puzzles'*: Galassi 2003, 43, footnote 47 and page 36.

<sup>164</sup> See for example: Campany (ed.) 2004, 121.

<sup>165</sup> Galassi 2003, 31, 35; Campany (ed.) 2004, 121. *'Prada II'* (1997), 166x316 cm. Plate 134 in: Syring (ed.) 1998.

<sup>166</sup> Campany (ed.) 2004, 24.

<sup>167</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

well-composed subject matter is worthy of imitation through photography, a view shared by Jeff Wall, who is greatly admired by Gursky.<sup>168</sup>

In order to try to explain some of the resemblances to paintings to be found in Gursky's photography, in particular in relation with the occurrence of art history's '*valid formal vocabulary*',<sup>169</sup> and also in order to focus on how the representation of these photographs assimilates to that of painting, it is necessary to take a closer look at Gursky's production process. Whereas analogue photography had clearly differed in its work processes and presentation from painting, the use of digital techniques, new photographic technology and print techniques has blurred the boundaries of the two pictorial practices.

### **3. Work Process and Production: A Medieval Workshop in Contemporary Times**

At the end of the 1990s, Gursky began to use a hybrid approach in his work. In case he needed to revise images digitally, he scanned the negatives and produced digital files on his computer which he could later revise, sometimes pixel by pixel. After the completion of this process, he produced new negatives, adjusting contrast, colour and light with conventional darkroom techniques, as well as producing analogue prints;<sup>170</sup> thus his work in the 1990s was still a combination of conventional and modern digital techniques.

In 2003, Gursky's work process and image production techniques were the subject of the radio broadcast *Scala*, by *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR) in Germany.<sup>171</sup> The production process was followed step by step by the presenter Claudia Dichter. In the new century, the work process had undergone significant changes. Gursky now collaborated with a team of experts at the Grieger photo laboratory in Düsseldorf, where work generally started with his digital file. Photographers who came to use the facility were themselves able to make corrections, i.e. manipulate the file, or consult the laboratory's IT specialist. Six years on, a film documentary from 2009, revealed that Gursky no longer depended exclusively on Grieger's computer facilities and IT specialist; he employed his own graphic designer, who worked under his direct supervision in his studio.<sup>172</sup> Digitization had made the work process easier, given that

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<sup>168</sup> Reiter Raabe 1997; for Wall's view on the subject see: Galassi 2003, 31; Burnett 2005b.

<sup>169</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>170</sup> Galassi 2003, 39.

<sup>171</sup> Dichter 2003.

<sup>172</sup> Schmidt-Garre 2009.

corrections could be applied and the results seen immediately, compared to the analogue process where colour or contrast correction could be checked and corrected only by means of several test prints.<sup>173</sup>

The exposure of the image has to be corrected digitally, in order to optimize colours and light effects. This process can take up to ten weeks until all the elements are coordinated and convey a realistic depiction of the subject matter, however constructed this reality may be. The second step is the production of a negative; this sometimes has to be produced in several parts, depending on the actual size of the image. Thirdly, the negative is exposed to three coloured lasers and then put into a lightproof box. The image is then chemically developed.<sup>174</sup>

In the fourth step the image is retouched by hand with transparent paint consisting mainly of egg white. The image, usually consisting of two or more parts, is then joined together by hand. The last step is the bonding of the photographic material to an acrylic surface using *Diasec*, a form of glue sprayed on the surface of the image to join it to the acrylic glass. Through this procedure the image is sealed and protected against ultraviolet radiation for several years.<sup>175</sup> This process involves a team of four staff members of the photo laboratory who report back to Gursky.

The use of the photographic medium together with computer technology, and the execution of the images in collaboration with the staff of the Grieger photo laboratory, results in a method of composing and producing images reminiscent of a medieval workshop, in which one master and several journeymen produced a piece of art, and in regard to which future art historians might have difficulties distinguishing the hands of the 'master' from those of his 'journeymen'.

Not only has the production process of photographic images changed, but new print and framing techniques offer different options for photographic presentations. Gursky's collaboration with the Düsseldorf photo laboratory started while he was a student of the Bechers in 1986. Whether the process was as costly in terms of technical input as in later years is questionable, given the technical standards of the time. In 1987, after graduation as a '*Meisterschüler*', Gursky exhibited his series '*Security Guards*' (1982-85) at Düsseldorf airport; in these images porters were depicted at their reception desks. He presented his images as large-scale transparencies in back-lit boxes, a presentation form that was favoured by the advertising industry, with richly illuminated colours and large-scale presence that would grab the attention of the spectator.

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<sup>173</sup> Letter exchange of 13.01.2010 with Wolfgang Grieger of Grieger GmbH.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. See also Grieger n.d.



However, this was a presentation form used by the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, who influenced Gursky's work immensely and whom he had met through the curator Kasper König during his studies in Düsseldorf. It was the only time that Gursky exhibited his work in back-lit boxes, given that he felt he was '*in such a tough spot with Jeff Wall*'.<sup>176</sup>

By the mid-1980s, a general shift from small-scale to large-scale photographs became more noticeable in that it was now possible to produce large-scale printing paper and offer high-quality prints, in particular with the invention of the chromogenic print (also known as the 'C-print'). Invented in the 1960s, with a break-through in the 1980s by the Swiss company Ciba-Geigy, it offered enlarged colour prints made from transparencies or negatives without any loss in quality, i.e. colour and definition. But larger prints could not be produced in a private dark-room: professional photo laboratories and their facilities were needed. In order to supply the demand of the art markets more photographers began to produce large prints. When Thomas Ruff organized an exhibition at the Philip Nelson Gallery in Lyon in 1986, the gallery offered to fund three large-scale prints of his portrait series, which Ruff commissioned at Grieger's laboratory.<sup>177</sup> The portrait series became a success and brought a lot of press attention to Ruff's work.

Such large-scale images – made with view cameras, which secured clarity and sharpness, in combination with modern printing techniques that guaranteed brilliant colours, and with a high mirror finish under their *Diasec* surface – could compete in appearance with painting. From now on Grieger, originally specializing in different printing techniques mainly for the commercial advertisement industry, changed direction through their contact with the Düsseldorf Academy students. The company began to specialize in analogue and digital photographic enlargement, broadened their expertise in digital printing techniques, and offered a wide range of support, technology and lab space to artists to realize their ideas. Thanks to Ruff's success more artists' commissions followed, in particular from other students of the Bechers, like Gursky, Thomas Struth and Axel Hütte.

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<sup>176</sup> Seelig 1992. See also Galassi 2003, 31, 44, footnote 45.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 27.

#### **4. Work Principles and Subject matter:**

##### **The Even Distribution of a Pictorial Cosmos**

Gursky's oeuvre is defined by three recurrent elements: firstly, an even distribution of attention, achieved through an all-over composition and a large-scale format, as described above; secondly, the essence of reality constructed through the use of facts as a foundation for a fictional subject matter; and thirdly, the iconography of the mass: the depiction of crowds of people, crowded places or objects which become an ornamental pattern through a distanced view.

In the 1980s a broader spectrum of large-scale images found their way into the art world, as photographs, transparencies or film installations. The enlargement to more than life-size also has an effect on the way the image is viewed; it does not necessarily elucidate the subject matter, something Walter Benjamin had already recognized, but it might bring to light new structural elements and unseen textures.<sup>178</sup> From a distance the viewer sees a macrocosm of an overall structure that defines the image's appearance, contrast and colour. Here, the image depicts sometimes more of a pattern than depicting the actual subject matter. Closer up, the viewer is confronted with a detailed microcosm, but no matter how much detail is revealed here, this view will not convey anything meaningful for the spectator to make sense of the overall subject matter. Nevertheless, an oversized image reveals the aesthetic possibilities which enlargement offers by creating unseen microcosmic segments and structure, aspects which have an individual existence with their own appeal apart from within the overall composition. Furthermore, an image that is from the start destined for oversized measurements has different intentions to a small-scale image that is subsequently blown up. These photographs offer a co-existence of close and distant views, like a painting would have done, and aim for an overwhelming appearance with which to capture the spectator.

The trigger for an image should be, in Gursky's view, '*the immediate visual experience*'.<sup>179</sup> He also remarked: '*Questions of social relevance or contextual strategy should, in my opinion, be considered only in a second phase. In the first instance, what*

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<sup>178</sup> Benjamin 1977b, 36.

<sup>179</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 9.

*concerns me is the autonomy of the picture and confidence in the power of the image.*<sup>180</sup>

Gursky's images often present this concept of macrocosm versus microcosm: panoramic subject matters revealing their abstract character at a distance or their intimate details on close-up view, sometimes digitally constructed, often leaving aside at first sight social issues and broader context, like *'Stateville, Illinois'* (2002) (Plate 4), for example, which depicts the high-security wing of an American state prison.

The macrocosm shows an overall geometrical pattern of horizontal and vertical lines, which spans the image from one side to the other. This regular, square pattern stems from the metal bars of the cells and actually distracts at first from the fact that one can actually look into the cells of the prison inmates. A close-up reveals, for example, the tiny cells with broken windows and their prisoners, some standing looking through the gratings, others sitting on their beds. Here the microcosm offers on closer inspection the critical social aspects of this subject matter, whereas the macrocosm offers the aesthetic appeal of the overall structure. The large-scale print allows the two to be united: the anonymous pattern and the individual detail.

In 1994, the German art historian Rudolf Schmitz took the view that Gursky's images depict an overlapping of structures, gradation of nuances and variety of serial elements which leave the spectator to make the decision about how to approach this variety and in which order, and whether to pick a detail or to approach the image as a whole. Schmitz called this feature in Gursky's images *'gleichmäßige Aufmerksamkeitsverteilung'*, which means that all elements in his photographs are worthy of an even distribution of attention.<sup>181</sup> The all-over composition is one of the main characteristics of Gursky's images, an achievement made possible by the enormous enlargements of the prints, which allows this interplay between distance and closeness.

To create images that offer an essence of the depicted reality is often closely allied with extensive preparatory work and a particular technical execution. The technical execution of his photographs, especially when digitally manipulated, distinguishes Gursky nearly from all the other students of the Bechers, with the exception of Thomas Ruff. Closer scrutiny of his conceptual ideas reveals that the use of a computer becomes, on some occasions, essential for the realization of his subject matter. Gursky once spoke about how he developed a pictorial idea for *'Untitled V'* (1997) (Plate 5), an image that depicts a shelf stocked with 204 training shoes, which he called *'a work of*

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Schmitz 1994, 8.

*fantasy*.<sup>182</sup> On this occasion, Gursky travelled to New York to take a photograph of a shelf of shoes in a room that was exclusively built for this purpose. He then photographed the shelf six times, restocked it with new shoes for every shot and tried cautiously to find the right perspective. He later explained his decision for going to such lengths: *'Previously I had seen a similar situation, but the documentary material alone would not have sufficed for a convincing photograph. The real shoe display was pictorially ineffective and harmlessly presented.'*<sup>183</sup>

To realize his visual idea he created an artificial shelf and modified his idea through digital manipulation. He eventually amalgamated six negatives into his composition. At first glance, it is almost impossible to appreciate that the depicted shelf does not exist in the way it is shown, and that it has been digitally constructed. The documentary material, i.e. the facts, become the essential foundation for the creation of a fictional scene and subject matter, which still profits from a general belief that photographic images depict a precise reproduction of reality. However, by realizing his pictorial ideas digitally, he began to expand the boundaries of his medium.

This expansion and his ever more challenging pictorial ideas developed gradually and in conjunction with existing technology, something that can be seen in a series of images of the river Rhine. After his graduation in 1987, Gursky began to distance himself from the strict concept of serial photography, but he still revisited the Rhine motif three times. The Rhine is one of Germany's epic subject matters and has been the source of inspiration for numerous paintings, photographs and probably, most famously, for Wagner's opera *'Rheingold'* and the legend about the water-nymph Lorelei. The meandering river and its surrounding landscape have been portrayed by painters of the Romantic era, like Carl Friedrich Lessing (1808-80) for example, so much so that the German term *'Rheinromantik'* was invented to describe the cultural and art-historical developments of this period and area. But the Rhine provided enough fascination to be painted during the German Expressionistic and *Neue Sachlichkeit* eras as well, for example by Carlo Mense in his painting *'Blick von Rheinbreitbach auf das Siebengebirge'* (1950), depicting a particular view from the small town of Rheinbreitbach towards the Siebengebirge mountains. Mense's view had already been photographed in 1936 by August Sander, who made several shots of the Rhine, like for example the photograph *'Die Rheinschleife bei Boppard'* (c. 1936) (Plate 6). Gursky, with his plans to depict the river Rhine, was already in good company. In 1988, he photographed *'New Year's Day Swimmers'* (Plate 7), an analogue image that depicts a

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<sup>182</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

distance view of a group of people in the Rhine. A number of boats float on the river, people are swimming, and the background depicts a town silhouette. Gursky remarked about the image: *'A picture like the New Year's Day Swimmers leaves open the question whether this is an image about a murder case or whether we are seeing people being baptized in the river Rhine.'*<sup>184</sup> The narrative element addressed by Gursky is not an intentional product and aim of his work, but results from a distant and elevated perspective which causes the spectator to speculate about what is going on in the image. This first attempt by Gursky to photograph the Rhine from a distant perspective with a town silhouette perfectly positioned in the middleground is reminiscent of the idyllic *veduta* painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowing topographical identification (the town silhouette of Cologne), describing an historical occurrence (New Year's Day swim) and depicting a typical landscape feature of the region (Rhine).

Eight years later, Gursky presented quite another image of the river: *'Rhine'* (1996) (Plate 8). This time the photograph has lost its narrative element and its reference to classical painting. The spectator is confronted with a composition that is clear and strict: the depiction of a river composed of stripes, appearing like an artificially constructed landscape. Gursky explained that a factory in the background, which he did not like, brought about his change in approach and that he took the shot of the sky from the opposite side of the river.<sup>185</sup> He had a particular pictorial idea in mind which he fused together digitally. The curator Veit Görner described *'Rhine'* (1996) as an *'extract of a landscape'*.<sup>186</sup>

Three years later, in 1999, Gursky revisited the Rhine motif again. The 1988 *'Rhine'* photograph has changed entirely: there are no humans, no ships visible and the town skyline has disappeared; what remains is an image consisting of clearly proportioned horizontal stripes of the river. With *'Rhine II'* (1999) (Plate 9) Gursky wanted to create *'the most contemporary possible view'* of the Rhine, one that could also be described as an essence of *'the extract of a landscape'*.<sup>187</sup> When Hilla Becher was asked about *'Rhine II'* (1999), she remarked that she liked the image very much, and also admitted that this had caused an argument between her and her husband Bernd, who thought that Gursky had gone too far with this design, which no longer worked. For Hilla Becher the abstract character of the image made her suspect that Gursky had modified the photograph: *'It is suspiciously smooth, as if it were drawn with a ruler, and that is why I*

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<sup>184</sup> Schmitz 1994, 7.

<sup>185</sup> Email exchange with Veit Görner, 31.10.2007.

<sup>186</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>187</sup> Siegel 2001; Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

*don't quite buy this.*<sup>188</sup> This suspicion can be shared, given that there are no disruptive elements, and compared to the 1996 '*Rhine*', the image looks even more streamlined, as if the sky, the river and the grass had been modified to compose a landscape that consists of clear minimalistic stripes; furthermore the increase in size, to the enormous measurement of 2 m by over 3.5 m, underpins this effect. Yet despite the spectator's view that the image must have been digitally manipulated, Gursky stated (in his reply to Hilla Becher's assumption): '*The restoration [die Bereinigung] has taken place quite economically.*'<sup>189</sup> Gursky said that he erased the *Lausward*, a power plant, in the middle of the horizon, but the foreground and water were not modified in any way. While running along his usual route near the river Rhine, Gursky spotted the location near the power plant and came back several times to take shots. He wanted the water to have a particular rough-looking surface and noticed that he needed a gentle breeze from the west to achieve this. Again, different documentary material from different moments of time and different perspectives, barely '*restored*', as Gursky puts it, have become the basis for a fictional image of the Rhine.

The oversized enlargement and all-over composition allows an even distribution of attention to a landscape that appears to consist of horizontal stripes, looking, from a distance, like an ornamental pattern. The pattern invites reference to American Abstract Expressionists, as in Mark Rothko's symmetrical rectangular colour fields, where his thinly applied colours softly melt into the next rectangular field, creating a diffuse atmosphere. Gursky's image also brings to mind Barnett Newman's large-scale paintings from the 1940s, which depict extreme reduction of forms, with monochrome colour fields only occasionally separated by a lighter painted line. It is this graphic gesture, this preference for monochrome, the clear and orderly surfaces of colour-field paintings, which might bring Gursky's photographs into a line of development with post-war American painting.<sup>190</sup>

The Rhine series illustrates the transformation from an actual reality to a fictitious reality and finally to a constructed reality. These transformations result from Gursky's more complex conceptual ideas supported by the evolving technical possibilities for his photographic medium, and emphasize his interest in a formal strictness and clarity. Every unwanted distraction is revised, a fact that he explains with his '*preference for clear structures*', in order '*to keep track of things and maintain his grip on the world.*'<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Transcribed and translated by the author from Schmidt-Garre 2009.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Galassi 2003, 36, Plate 48.

<sup>191</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

The third recurrent element in Gursky's work is his preference for the 'ornament of the mass'. Several of his images depict crowds of people, for example, at a stock exchange, a ski race, a concert or a sports stadium. These crowds might appear as if they have no structure and no order, except perhaps in the military. However, in some of Gursky's images the human mass is rendered as a turbulent and colourful pattern. The photograph '*Chicago Board of Trade II*' (1999) (Plate 10) shows the interior space of the Chicago stock exchange. The colourful turmoil of tiny human figures is depicted dressed in different-coloured jackets, and form three octagonal shapes evenly distributed throughout the whole space. From close up, the spectator sees that some parts of the image overlap, are doubled and joined together, resulting in the overall octagonal pattern. Gursky seems to be more interested in the pattern of human masses than in what they are actually doing. His distanced view from a bird's-eye perspective gives an overview of the human mass. An artificial ordering of this complex spectacle seems to appear in the colourful octagonal shape, consisting of people in red, blue, yellow, green and white uniforms that might be beyond the knowledge of an onlooker – like a swarm of bees in which, as the French poet Maurice Maeterlinck has pointed out, every insect is destined for a certain task. There are '[...] *the ladies of honor who wait on the queen and never allow her out of their sight; the house-bees who air, refresh, or heat the hive by fanning their wings, and hasten the evaporation of the honey that may be too highly charged with water; the architects, masons, wax-workers, and sculptors who form the chain and construct the combs [...]*'.<sup>192</sup> Yet, unlike stock exchange traders pursuing their individual interests, the bees' first and foremost objective is the common good of the colony, even if it means killing their own kind, as Maeterlinck remarked: '*But after the queen's impregnation, when flowers begin to close sooner, and open later, the spirit one morning will coldly decree the simultaneous and general massacre of every male*'.<sup>193</sup>

In 1994, the art historian Rudolf Schmitz used Siegfried Kracauer's term '*das Ornament der Masse*' ('*the Ornament of the Mass*') to explain some of the forms and shapes of human beings in Gursky's images, with particular reference to the images '*Tokyo Stock Exchange*' (1990) and '*Genoa*' (1991). Since then Kracauer's expression has become a leitmotif in the literature about Gursky.<sup>194</sup> Kracauer invented the concept of '*the Ornament of the Mass*' to explain the idea behind the ornamental pattern of humans in large crowds. He distinguished between an ornament of the mass that has

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<sup>192</sup> Maeterlinck 2004, Chapter II, Paragraph 10.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Schmitz 1994, 12.

no purpose other than an aesthetic one and can be seen, for example, in sporting events, and an ornament of the mass that presents a formal and political entity, for example in military parades.<sup>195</sup> Kracauer's concept cannot be applied easily to Gursky's depiction of the stock exchange or other of his depictions of crowds, especially not if these human beings have been formed, possibly by digital means, into an ornament of the mass and their appearance as a mass did not originate from either an aesthetic or a political purpose, as clearly defined by Kracauer.

However, this changed with a series of images from 2007, named after the North Korean capital Pyongyang, in which Gursky depicts a mass of humans who are meant to represent political solidarity, as Kracauer had described it. This work group depicts the mass-rallies of soldiers, students, school children and gymnasts in North Korea, one of the last communist dictatorships in the world, at the Arirang festival in Pyongyang. It took Gursky around eighteen months to get permission to photograph during the Arirang festival. This is named after a Korean love song; it is held twice a year, lasting two to three months, and celebrates the birth of the North Korean dictator, the late Kim Il-Sung.<sup>196</sup> Gursky attended seven shows and took several shots of the performances,<sup>197</sup> which consisted of gymnastic dancers, military bands and groups of children performing in the arena. The stadium swarms with people provided with coloured paper-charts, ready to hold them up as and when advised, in order to form an enormous colourful picture. *'Pyongyang I'* (2007) (Plate 11), for example, depicts in the foreground numerous rows of female dancers dressed in pink costumes, holding red and white pompons above their heads. The middleground of the picture depicts crouching, kneeling and standing dancers and a huge globe on a plinth surrounded by dancers. Finally, the background depicts the rostrum of the stadium showing the pieces of coloured card – making pictures of red and white flowers – being held up by the

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<sup>195</sup> Kracauer 1977. Kracauer's book was first published in 1927. His work was also influenced by Hagemann 1950 and Ortega y Gasset 1930 and the notion of how individuals lose their identity in the mass. Kracauer himself was influenced by the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s. In his book *Von Caligari zu Hitler. Eine psychologische Geschichte des deutschen Films*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, he remarked about Riefenstahl's film *'Triumph des Willens'*: *'In this scene, flesh and stone become one – draped in the full panoply of Nazi iconography a mass spectacle of human geometry where the mass become part of a gigantic set in a communal celebration of power, order and solemnity. These carefully rehearsed performances in which actors, light, flags, architecture are lovingly orchestrated in a complex visual arrangement of uniforms and group formations to form a kind of Gesamtkunstswerk' (total art).*

<sup>196</sup> Telegraph Online News 2010.

<sup>197</sup> McCann 2007, 100.



crowds, crowned by a snow-white mountain at the top. Gursky's distanced view focuses on a geometrical red and white pattern combined with the flowers of the coloured charts that dissolve into thousands of individuals when seen from close up. In order to photograph those masses Gursky needed an elevated position, as he explained: *'Eventually they [the North Koreans] put us up high in the middle of the stadium next to a 5 mx3 m portrait of Kim Il-Sung; it was the perfect elevation for what I wanted to achieve. The extra distance allowed the camera to manage [capture] the movement of the performers.'*<sup>198</sup>

Interviewed in 2007 by the German magazine *Spiegel* and asked whether these photographs were an indication that he had become politically committed, he denied the suggestion strongly and explained that it was not his aim to express his political opinion but to give the western spectator the possibility to see for himself a *'brehtaking'* spectacle. Yet, Gursky's photographs might depict, the French philosopher Guy Debord's concept of *'a concentrated spectacle'*<sup>199</sup> of a totalitarian regime, which *'is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life'*.<sup>200</sup> Debord explained that the spectacle is a valuable tool for such a regime, given that it offers the possibility of *'a nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life'*.<sup>201</sup>

When asked whether his work ascribed to this dictatorship a certain aesthetic, he disagreed, almost in anger, replying: *'Nonsense. In the mass that I depict every human being remains a human being; everyone takes on a slightly different posture. The uniqueness is visible. I am composing images but I am not idealizing them.'*<sup>202</sup> However, a dictatorship cannot allow any sort of uniqueness or individuality, as Debord pointed out: *'The dictatorship [...] cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and any choice made independently of it, whether regarding food or music or anything else, thus amounts to a declaration of war against it. This dictatorship must be enforced by permanent violence'*.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Debord 1967, Chapter 3, Paragraph 64.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., Chapter 9, Paragraph 215.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1, Paragraph 24.

<sup>202</sup> Knöfel/Beyer 2007 (translated by the author).

<sup>203</sup> Debord 1967, Chapter 3, Paragraph 64.

Speaking in another interview about the political message of mass choreography under a dictatorship, Gursky admitted some unease but then pointed out: *'In a way, for sure, it is worrying, but we can't study these phenomena with our own values. The young people taking part looked very happy, and it was being done not to honour Kim Jong-Il, but to honour his dead father Kim Il-Sung, who is a kind of substitute for God in North Korea.'*<sup>204</sup>

Gursky might be right to say that we cannot access these '*phenomena*' with '*our own values*'; that we have to approach them with a critical understanding of the subject matter. This could be tantalizing for Gursky, but there are certain forms of aesthetics which cannot easily be detached from their content, an experience which haunted the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl for the whole of her life.<sup>205</sup> Susan Sontag for example has argued that the aesthetic and beauty of Riefenstahl's films and photographs are firmly linked to the political ideology of the Nazi regime.<sup>206</sup> After all, the Arirang festival is not simply an event for gymnasts and soldiers; it has to be seen in the context of Kim Il-Sung's idea to develop a pure socialist realist art in North Korea, which is strongly influenced by Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong and according to North Korean state sources then developed independently under the philosophy of '*Juche or Self-Reliance*'.<sup>207</sup> Under the reign of Kim Il-Sung the philosophy of *Juche* replaced Marxism-Leninism and in 1972, when South Korea introduced a new constitution emphasizing anti-communist laws, the North Korean President included *Juche* in the state constitution with its main aim of offering the Korean population the opportunity to shape the development of its nation. Accordingly the individual has to put the interest of the nation first and conduct him/herself with unconditional loyalty to the state.<sup>208</sup> The Arirang festival was one of many artistic productions created by Kim Jong-Il and offered a vital opportunity, on one hand, to preserve in the strongest terms the personality cult around him and his dead father, the '*eternal president*' Kim Il-Sung, and, on the other, to present the Korean nation united as one in accordance with its *Juche* philosophy.

Artistic mass-productions like this are therefore carefully planned and designed. Nothing is left to chance; the gymnasts and dancers for example are not amateurs and

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<sup>204</sup> McCann 2007, 100.

<sup>205</sup> Rother 2002.

<sup>206</sup> Sontag 1976. Rother (2002) points out that Sontag's essay contains several factual and historical errors.

<sup>207</sup> Portal 2005, 12, 27-30.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 66-69.

will often have been selected for training in their childhood.<sup>209</sup> Kim Jong-Il inherited the presidency over the North Korean single party state and presided over arguably the world's worst human rights record, a controversial nuclear programme and appalling poverty. It might be tempting to judge these images purely on their artistic and aesthetical grounds as enormous mass events with a precise mass choreography offering a colourful photo opportunity. Yet, to evaluate the image only for its visual impact and not for its content would entail dismissing any sort of iconological interpretation in which the cultural, social and historical background could be clarified. One would thereby also dismiss the element of propaganda in these images, as well as the purpose of the festival to convey a political message. In a way, Gursky seems to have tried to avoid an argument like this, when he decided to exclude from his Pyongyang series obvious propaganda elements like political slogans or portraits of the state leader. However, mass performances, in particular parades, dances and games, are a favourite propaganda tool of totalitarian states, most notably fascist Germany, the Soviet Union, the former East Germany and China, to display the population's unity with its state apparatus, as Keith Howard has remarked: *'Mass performances demonstrate, to paraphrase state ideologues, that the people are in perfect harmony with the state and its leaders; that the masses control their own destinies and determine their own cultural production.'*<sup>210</sup> The conformity of the masses therefore symbolizes the unity of the population that supports the communist system and its political aims. Mass rallies or performances deliver ideal propagandistic images which are mostly used for agitation purposes and in North Korea's case in particular help to proclaim the equality and unity of a classless society.

Nor can the depiction of certain symbols and colours in these images be detached from their propagandistic iconography. For example *'Pyongyang I, IV, V'* depict a snow-white mountain at the top of the rostrum, the sacred Mount Paektu, meaning *'white-headed mountain'*; this refers to Kim Jong-Il's birthplace and the place from where Kim Il-Sung organized his resistance against the Japanese occupying forces. Kim Jong-Il claimed to have been born on Korea's holiest mountain in an anti-Japanese resistance camp. His birth was according to state propaganda heralded by a star and two rainbows. As a matter of fact Kim Jong-Il was born in 1941 in a refugee camp in the Soviet Union; however, as Jane Portal notes, the Kims needed the mythical connection to Mount Paektu to underpin and substantiate their inheritance of the leadership.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Howard 2004.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>211</sup> Portal 2005, 133-134.

Therefore Kim Jong-Il and his son always maintained this legend, despite its vestigial connection with reality. For example, they apparently drank only spring water from Mount Paektu, and their rice was grown near the birthplace of 'the beloved leader'.<sup>212</sup>

The colour red, shown in all the images except *'Pyongyang III'*, refers to the communist party and Kim Jong-Il, in particular in the display of the red flowers (*'Pyongyang I, IV'*), which depict a begonia named *'Kimjongilia'*. The white flower (*'Pyongyang I, V'*) can refer either to the magnolia (the national flower of Korea) or to a white orchid called *'Kimilsungia'* after Kim Il-Sung.<sup>213</sup> The gun (*'Pyongyang II'*) represents the weapon which Kim Il-Sung gave his son Kim Jong-Il. The colours red, blue and white (*'Pyongyang IV, V'*) relate to the national flag, where red stands for the communist movement, blue equals sovereignty, peace and friendship, and white relates to purity.<sup>214</sup>

The iconography of these mass spectacles is embedded in the regime's communist ideology and culture; it might not be readable by every western citizen but is well known to North Koreans and is not displayed for ornamental purposes. Propaganda in a dictatorship aims to convince not only those that are already influenced by it, but also tries to win over those who are opposed or remain outside its reach. Therefore artists, musicians and photographers have an important function in promoting the regime's ideology to the outside world through their work. A mass event like the Arirang festival is arranged in the first instance for its propaganda effect; consequently it is impossible for a photographer to be an objective witness to it.

Photographs of such a mass spectacle will spread their message beyond borders and are detached from time; this is exactly why film and photography, often commissioned by totalitarian regimes, are valuable 'expert witnesses' to propaganda events. Gursky, unlike Riefenstahl, was of course not commissioned by and has never profited from or contributed to the regime. However, he and his work found the approval of the communist party, otherwise he would never have gained access to North Korea, a state which pursues strict entry regulations and permits for foreigners, isolating itself from the international community. The idea of a photo-shoot by Gursky, a well-established and internationally recognized artist, whose personality or work could not simply be dismissed as political in any way, must have appealed to elements in the communist regime, who might have imagined that his photographs would disseminate a positive view of the communist state and, in a wider sense, disseminate North

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<sup>212</sup> Dufour 2011.

<sup>213</sup> Portal 2005, 90-91; Domteit 2007.

<sup>214</sup> AsianInfo n.d.

Korean propaganda through his art. In contrast there is Gursky's view that the trigger for an image should be '*the immediate visual experience*'; his focus lies with '*the autonomy of the picture*' and '*the power of the image*.'<sup>215</sup>

The ornament of the mass is a guarantor for a stunning visual impact and is a favoured element in Gursky's visual vocabulary. But the Arirang festival differs from Gursky's other mass spectacles, where people are formed unconsciously into a mass ornament by their activities. The North Korean event is intended and styled from the outset for its spectacular visual impact, in order to reveal its united mass of workers; everything is directed towards a distanced, over-all view of the event, one which is already perfectly composed for Gursky's favoured bird's-eye perspective. The irony of it all is that these photographs of an idealized mass spectacle of the communist worker state, intended to symbolize the unity and equality of North Korean's classless society, themselves became an emblem of capitalism, in particular when '*Pyongyang IV*' (2007) was auctioned for £1.3 million and was clearly not destined to embellish a working-class home.<sup>216</sup>

### **5. Analogue and Digital Compositions: Gursky's '*Grip on the World*'<sup>217</sup>**

In 2008, Gursky was described by the German newspaper *Die Welt* as an '*Akkumulationskünstler*'<sup>218</sup> – an '*accumulation artist*'. The spectator, however, is not able to see any sort of accumulation at all; at best s/he might be able to guess at it – traces of Gursky's use of digital techniques are hidden under an immaculately realistic-looking surface.

In 1980, a year before leaving the Folkwangschule in Essen and starting his studies with the Bechers, Gursky took the analogue photograph '*Kirchfeldstraße*' (1980) (Plate 12). The image, probably shot in the stairwell of a typical German *Altbau*, an apartment block, with its half-grey-painted walls and grey wallpaper, depicts a window that faces the red brick wall of the building opposite. The window consists of four panes of glass, two smaller ones at the top and two larger ones at the bottom. At the bottom of the two smaller panes runs the part of the frame that includes the handle. This hides the exact corner of the brick building. By looking more closely out of the window one can see that

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<sup>215</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 9.

<sup>216</sup> Sotheby's London, auction on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2010, '*Pyongyang IV*' (2007) sold for £1,329,250.

<sup>217</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>218</sup> Poschardt 2008.

the right pane of glass frames the brick wall, its vanishing lines disappearing in the right and left window panes.<sup>219</sup>

The spectator is immediately struck by a resemblance to Otto Steinert's work highlighting the importance of perspective and the isolation of unusual, nearly disregarded subject matter. Steinert's subjective photography corresponded harmoniously with Henri Cartier-Bresson's idea of '*the decisive moment*'. In line with his role model Cartier-Bresson, Gursky worked with a Leica camera at the time and shot mainly small-scale black and white photographs.<sup>220</sup> Most of these images depict ordinary scenes of daily lives, and bear comparison to the photographs of William Eggleston and Robert Adams. Gursky once admitted that his work at the time was influenced by the '*Eauclaire book*', which he called his bible.<sup>221</sup> Sally Eauclaire, in her book '*The New Color Photography*', published in 1981, examined more than forty American photographers including Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld and William Eggleston which had an influence on some of Gursky's images; for example, '*Unpublished (Schützenfest)*' (c. 1979) and '*Unpublished (Gran Canaria)*' (c. 1979).<sup>222</sup>

Twenty years later, in 2000, Gursky photographed three pages of a book, or at least that's what it seemed. The three images were exhibited as '*Untitled XII*' (2000) (Plate 13) and showed some German text. The pages (523, 753 and 769) are shown out of context. The book is a hardback bound in beige linen lying on what appears to be a pine table. On reading the photographed pages, one first observes that there are no names mentioned in the text, but there seems to be a protagonist who gives detailed descriptions of the world around him and tries to make sense of it. With these three pictures Gursky catapults the spectator into Robert Musil's unfinished novel '*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*' (The Man Without Qualities, 1923-42). However, the spectator will never be able to find these pages, because they simply do not exist in the way we see them. Gursky's operational tactic was to select fragments of Musil's novel and assemble them into a new text and then, as Michael Fried explains, he '*commissioned a typesetter and a printer to produce the uniform-seeming pages that he went on to photograph*'.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Hentschel (ed.) 2008, 40.

<sup>220</sup> Galassi 2003, 12.

<sup>221</sup> Reiter Raabe 1997, 21.

<sup>222</sup> Images in: Galassi 2003, 12. Image No. 6 '*Unpublished (Gran Canaria)*' (c. 1979), gelatine silver print; Image No. 7, '*Unpublished (Schützenfest)*' (c. 1979), gelatine silver print.

<sup>223</sup> Fried 2008, 177.

In Musil's novel, the man without qualities is the thirty-two-year-old Ulrich, who, having worked as army officer, engineer and mathematician, wants to go on vacation from life itself in order to find himself, but he does not believe in any kind of reflection about his character. He thinks the key to understanding the world around him is to analyse, in a profound and impersonal way, the system that holds the world together. Ulrich becomes the point of intersection of all the ideological and scientific options which could explain the world he perceives and observes without emotion. In a way Musil's novel could be seen here as an allegory of the Becher School. Further, Ulrich might inevitably remind one of Gursky himself, who shows us his world without any emotion or personal comment. On page 753 of *'Untitled XII'* (2000), we read: *'Das Gefühl muß ruhig sein, damit die Welt ordentlich ist und bloß vernünftige Beziehungen in ihr herrschen'* – *'emotion has to be calm so that the world is tidy and governed by rational relations'*: a fragment that must have appealed to Gursky, who once spoke about his passion for clear structures as a means of keeping track of things and maintaining his *'grip on the world'*.<sup>224</sup> In order to achieve these clear structures Gursky goes to considerable length and spares no expense, if one considers the complex genesis of *'Untitled XII'* (2000).

At around the same time, 1999-2000, that Gursky was working on his Musil images, Wall started work on his photograph *'After "Invisible Man"'* (1999-2000), modelled on Ralph Ellison's novel.<sup>225</sup> We should bear in mind of course that this might just be a coincidence, but certain aspects of this parallel suggest points of contrast and comparison. Wall's transposition of Ellison's novel is influenced by the Vancouver School of Photo-Conceptualism: a recreation of a fictional literature scene in a constructed setting which has its origins in a Harlem cellar that exists in reality. Looking at Wall's image, it becomes clear to the spectator that this is a constructed scene, whereas Gursky's image cannot be so easily assimilated into a 'natural' setting. His image still seems to show some sort of Becherian influence, even though there is a construction process involved, i.e. the assembling of selected text fragments and the typesetting and professional printing of these pages. This process is not known, nor is it visible or detectable in any way; therefore it does not influence our first perception of the image. Gursky's chosen fragments of Musil's text exist in reality and he uses the reality as a basis for his images. The result is an image that combines an undetectable expenditure of effort in its construction, similar to Wall's approach, but has a *'neusachliche'* appearance which has an association with the Bechers' visual vocabulary.

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<sup>224</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>225</sup> Ellison 2001.

In 2008, Gursky's '*grip on the world*'<sup>226</sup> tightened when he produced the digitally manipulated images '*Untitled XV*' (2008) (Plate 14) and '*Untitled XVI*' (2008) (Plate 15). '*Untitled XV*' (2008) depicts a grey coloured wall with numerous holes in it, which looks like an artificial, over-sized honeycomb with a metallic sheen. In front of the dominating appearance of this amorphous solid, one sees on the right-hand side a small podium and a microphone stand, which according to Gursky belongs to Campino, the front man of the German punk-rock band '*Tote Hosen*'. To the left, some white plastic cups are standing on the floor. The dark appearance of the ground and the ceiling frame the wall perfectly, drawing even more attention to its amorphous structure. In '*Untitled XVI*' (2008), two people appear in front of a similar wall of this honeycomb structure. On the right we see a person from behind wearing a grey hooded jacket, shorts and white shoes. On the left side of this youngish-looking person stands a grey plastic box on the floor with some CDs lying in front of it. Next to the box, to its left, are some of the wooden blocks with cushioned tops which are placed under oversized photographs to protect their frames while they rest on the floor during the build-up of an exhibition. On the left side, one sees a man kneeling on the floor holding a piece of the grey honeycomb structure in his hands. The only colour in this image is the man's taupe-coloured shirt. Several other pieces of the wall surround him on the floor. Behind him is the microphone stand covered with a jacket. Although the man is looking away from the spectator, there is enough detail to see that it is Gursky himself who is depicted. Gursky, when asked about this particular picture, commented: '*The last photograph*'<sup>227</sup> [...] *is influenced by a club that is run by a friend of mine. And although it's a picture of me ... in a way it's no longer a photograph. I am photographed, and a young person and some details are photographed too. But the whole space is completely artificial – it's calculated with an architectural software program; it's not photographed.*'<sup>228</sup>

He admits that he focused on the honeycomb structure for several weeks and as a result he woke up one morning and saw the structure everywhere. He then realized that he should be part of the image and needed to incorporate himself into it. In the original image, he included more personal objects, but later erased them again. Gursky wants the younger person on the right to remain anonymous, only remarking that s/he is very close to him and attended the fabrication of the image; therefore the best guess

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<sup>226</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>227</sup> Gursky refers to '*Cocoon II*' (2008).

<sup>228</sup> Lane 2009.



might be that it is his son or daughter.<sup>229</sup> Given that *'Untitled XVI'* (2008), and *'Untitled XV'* (2008) even more so, were mainly generated and constructed using software,<sup>230</sup> one might ask how they should be perceived. Gursky then clarifies his statement *'in a way it's no longer a photograph'* and explains: *'Yes, I did some of it without a camera, but because there are realistic elements in this picture [Untitled XVI] you read it as a photograph.'*<sup>231</sup> Gursky attempts to justify the term 'photography' for *'Untitled XVI'* (2008) through the inclusion of the photographic self-portrait and the photo of the hooded figure, and this expands and appropriates the definition of photography for his own purposes. Gursky's work has changed over the years from the standpoint of a distant observer, whose pictures portray unemotional accounts of the world around us, to that of an observer who artificially creates his recollection of the world with graphics programs hidden under a photographic surface that appears so realistic.

Gursky has used digital techniques since 1992, initially only as a retouching tool, and later mainly to revise and manipulate his photographs,<sup>232</sup> in order *'to emphasize formal elements that will enhance the picture, or, for example, to apply a picture concept that in real terms of perspective would be impossible to realize.'*<sup>233</sup> For Gursky the use of digital techniques is necessary when he cannot realize his visual ideas in any other way. He often takes several shots with his view-camera, sometimes filing negatives, which become a kind of raw material for his visual ideas, only to return to them later. In the early 1990s, the use of digital technology was not necessary; he did not revise the panoramic perspective of *'Engadin'* (1995) depicting a colourful pattern of skiers or the structure of a glacier in *'Aletschgletscher'* (1993).<sup>234</sup> On the other hand, his manipulation of *'Prada II'* (1997) is such that it is almost imperceptible to the viewer.<sup>235</sup> The original Prada shelf in *'Prada I'* (1996) is only two-storeyed.<sup>236</sup> For *'Prada II'* (1997) Gursky digitally added a third storey to the shelf and then took several

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<sup>229</sup> Gursky has two children from his first marriage with Baroness Antonia Pilars de Pilar: Poschardt 2008.

<sup>230</sup> Email exchange with Guy Lane.

<sup>231</sup> Lane 2009.

<sup>232</sup> Galassi 2003, 39.

<sup>233</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>234</sup> *'Engadin'* (1995), 186x291 cm; *'Aletschgletscher'* (1993), 179.5x215 cm. Plates 26 and 29 in: Galassi 2003.

<sup>235</sup> *'Prada II'* (1997), 166x316 cm. Plate 53 in *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *'Prada I'* (1996), 134x226 cm. Plate 25 in *ibid.*

photographs from different heights in order to achieve correct and realistic-looking perspective and light effects.<sup>237</sup>

Gursky's compositions play with different layers of reality, questioning the idea that a photographic image is a direct imprinted depiction of reality. In 1945, the French film critic André Bazin wrote about the objectivity of the analogue photographic medium describing its representational aspect as its strength, given that the viewer is constrained to believe that the depicted object exists.<sup>238</sup> At the time, as before, there was a debate about the objectivity of the analogue medium. In the view of the representatives of structuralism<sup>239</sup> a photographic image has to be seen as a '*transformation of reality*' and not as its representation.<sup>240</sup> The invention of digital technology, with its wide-ranging manipulative potential, made it more difficult to believe in the existence of the depicted object. The main difference was that the digital photographic medium included the intention of manipulation compared to the analogue medium, which obviously also offered the possibility of revision and manipulation, but never the intention, at least not to the same extent.

Several of Gursky's images depict a revised reality; for example, the constructed interior of an American supermarket '*99 Cent*' (1999) (Plate 16), for which he took several shots of supermarket aisles stocking a variety of colourful products and later assembled them digitally. He remarked about the image: '*The view I created in 99 Cent does exist in reality, but you'd have to destroy the walls of the store to photograph it.*'<sup>241</sup> Gursky used digital options quite economically for this image, resulting in a simple panoramic view of packed aisles focusing on the vast selection and colourful packaging of products and on the few shoppers who are nearly drowning in this sea of choice.

Gursky's choice of a panoramic view for this composition captures the sheer overwhelming scale of products at its best. Despite depicting an interior there is no feeling that the image actually portrays the interior of an actual architectural structure. The photograph consists of a fine net of vertical and horizontal lines: the vertical lines emanate from the columns that support the ceiling; the horizontal lines originate from the aisles and the products. The ceiling with its lights is made from a reflective material which further reinforces this geometrical construction, with the reflection of the colour

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<sup>237</sup> Email exchange with Veit Görner, 31.10.2007.

<sup>238</sup> Bazin 1975.

<sup>239</sup> Notably, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915-1980).

<sup>240</sup> Bourdieu (ed.) 1970.

<sup>241</sup> McCann 2007, 98-107.

and forms of the products in the ceiling. This effect, combined with the vertical and horizontal lines, neutralizes the normally clear visible separation between ground and ceiling, causing the illusion of a vast endless space where foreground (i.e. aisles), middleground (i.e. aisles) and background (i.e. back wall of the supermarket and ceiling) flow into each other.<sup>242</sup>

The panoramic perspective combined with the interaction between fore-, middle- and background enhances even more the creation of a vast space. The space is organized as a single-viewpoint perspective. The diagonal lines of the products converge at the white column, the vanishing point, in the middleground. The parallel lines from the shelves get slowly smaller as they get closer to the vanishing point, together with the products in the shelves, which diminish in size aisle by aisle. All of this geometric play creates an illusionistic Brunelleschian three-dimensional space. Gursky's use of colour adds to this effect as well: warm colours, like red and yellow, are varied with cold colours, like blue and green; combined with similar-looking products, their shape and form hardly varies.<sup>243</sup> This lack of variation in shapes causes a sort of monotony for the eye and allows it to wander through the colourful display and space; only during a more prolonged scrutiny does the spectator begin to access and question the subject matter in more searching way.

The spectator's relationship to the subject matter is dominated through this panoramic perspective. S/he would need an elevated and central position to see the subject matter in a similar way to Gursky's depiction of it: an elevated perspective originally used in landscape paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Claude Lorrain), allowing the spectator an idealized view.

The spectator is also influenced by Gursky's use of large-scale format: '99 Cent' (1999) measures 207x336 cm. The portrayal of life-sized subject matter imitates the real-life experience which the spectator might have when in front of the depicted object, literally drawing him into the picture and therefore blurring the borders between pictorial depiction and reality, a principle that originates from history painting. In front of an oversized history painting the spectator engages with the classical, mythological or

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<sup>242</sup> Several of Gursky's interiors follow this geometrical arrangement, for example 'Schiesser, Diptych' (1991), 'Karlsruhe, Siemens' (1991), 'Nuremberg, Grundig' (1993), 'Hong Kong, Stock Exchange, Diptych' (1994), 'Centre Pompidou' (1995). Similar geometrical composition can also be found in the exteriors 'Paris, Montparnasse' (1993) and 'Hong Kong, Shanghai Bank' (1994).

<sup>243</sup> Most of the products are packed in square boxes, except for the bottles in the middleground; but with the distant panoramic perspective and the fact that they are displayed in rows one can hardly distinguish between their shape and the dominant square forms.

biblical representation and becomes a part of it, taking the often elevated place of an eyewitness. The composition of Gursky's images relates to history painting but most of his subjects<sup>244</sup> are not narrative and can be accessed without a particular historical or cultural knowledge, nearly instantaneously, like advertising, because of the familiarity of their content and their design.

His photographs, whether analogue or digital, are composed with a superficial simplicity which is often created through symmetrical compositions and geometrical pattern, a uniformity achieved through the sparse use of colours and graphic structures as well as contrast originating from clearly distinguishable colours, all features which are used by the advertising industry.<sup>245</sup> Gursky's preference for geometrical compositions has been – over his career so far – independent of whether this are analogue or digital images. Yet the use of a computer has made it easier to construct well-balanced panoramic views with a rectangular grid. Some images are dominated by horizontal lines, like *'Rhine II'* (1999) and *'Toys "R" Us'* (1999). Others are composed similarly to *'99 Cent'* (1999) with a fine web of horizontal and vertical lines, for example *'Paris, Montparnasse'* (1993) and *'Brasilia, Assembly Room I'* (1994). And then there are images structured by horizontal and/or vertical lines relating to windows, fences or metal curtains, that obstruct the direct view onto the actual subject matter, like *'Zürich II'* (1985), *'Hong Kong, Shanghai Bank'* (1994) and *'Illinois, Stateville'* (2002).<sup>246</sup>

To ensure the undivided attention of the spectator, Gursky uses, as already explained, a large-scale format. Whereas in the 1980s his prints measured about 50 to 60 cm, from the 1990s it became possible gradually to enlarge prints until they reached 1.80 m, the largest width available at the time. Together with the *Diasec* method this change offered the possibility of joining single photographic prints together to make prints of vast measurements, which can be compared to outdoor advertising boardings. The content of Gursky's images is then mediated through the visual impact which a large-scale image has on its spectator. A specific narrative is of secondary nature and mostly not intended.

Gursky's digital compositions depict a reality which the spectator would otherwise not be able to see, which raises the question of whether he wants to deceive the spectator. His response is that he has no intention of doing so and wants the recipient

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<sup>244</sup> An exception would be *'Giordano Bruno'* (1989).

<sup>245</sup> Schweiger/Schrattenecker (eds.) 2001.

<sup>246</sup> Fried 2008, 166-169.

to experience his work as '*normal photographs*'.<sup>247</sup> The issue about deception occurs only because his medium of choice is photography rather than painting.

His work process, however, can be compared with that of a painter. The history of painting shows that artists have always used new possibilities and techniques to realize their visual ideas. Since its invention, the photographic medium has developed from a pictorial tool to a creative tool. Digital technology expands the possibilities of the photographic medium endlessly, offering a work process that approximates to that of a painter. When the curator Veit Görner asked Gursky whether there '*is a fundamental difference between photography and painting, where the artist always has the result of his activity in front of him*', he replied: '*Another, completely different way of working is electronic picture processing, as exemplified by Jeff Wall, or Thomas Demand's recording real, stage-managed spaces. This manner of working requires an arbitrary, gradual, and utterly controlled procedure, and I can no longer see the distinction you mentioned between photography and painting.*'<sup>248</sup> In Gursky's opinion the work processes of painting and photography have moved closer together than ever before, given the increasingly sophisticated computers and programs available.<sup>249</sup> For example the invention of the '*light pen*' allowed artists (Richard Hamilton, David Hockney) to work directly with displays on a screen.<sup>250</sup> The option to revise digital images on screen allows the artist to apply changes step by step and see their effects immediately, contrary to in the darkroom, so it has become easier, because more controllable, to transfer the compositional arrangements of paintings and to apply light effects or change contrast and colour. Perhaps we could say that the pictorial character of photography has been transformed into a more constructed and creative character in the digital era, in other words allowing artists to realize pictorial ideas in their photographs which were beforehand impossible to present.

Gursky's latest photographs are more constructed than his earlier works; this can be seen, for example, in '*Kathedrale I*' (2007) (Plate 17). The image depicts the interior of a gothic church with nine pointed arch windows dominating the image. The foreground depicts a group of five people; one is filming the windows with a camera. A woman next to the cameraman is taking pictures with a camera. The cameraman and the

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<sup>247</sup> Galassi 2003, 39.

<sup>248</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>249</sup> Gursky has often compared his work process to the approach of a painter. See for example conversations between Andreas Gursky and Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, 6<sup>th</sup> January–11<sup>th</sup> February 1992, in: Kunsthalle Zürich (ed.) 1992.

<sup>250</sup> See Chapter III.

photographer are standing between two other people; the one on the left is looking at the cameraman and the one on the right seems to be admiring the windows. Behind this group a man is looking at a folder. The group appears to be a film crew at work. To the left of the group a quadrangular hole can be seen in the ground with a pile of earth behind it, as if an excavation had taken place. The first obvious thing the viewer notices is the black and white colour of the gothic windows. The assumption that we are looking at a black and white image can be dismissed by a closer look at the grey, green, black, white and even a glimpse of the red clothes of the film crew.

This undisturbed, panoramic view of the cathedral windows feels unfamiliar. Where are the gothic columns that normally carry the weight of the main nave walls and the cathedral roof? They have all been digitally removed. The colours have been digitally altered. This results in the depiction of a monumental space where the people in the foreground give an indication of scale and proportion. There are no distinctive elements left in the image which can help to identify the depicted gothic cathedral with its pointed arch windows. The viewer is left with the impression of a mixture of gothic elements. Gursky depicts the essence of the gothic cathedral in a collage of several gothic structures. The only element in the picture which bears individual characteristics is the people and, unusually for Gursky, there is only a small group present. The man dressed in black with glasses and a pony tail appears to be the German film director Wim Wenders.<sup>251</sup> Under his direction the film camera and the photo camera seem to point in the direction of the rays of lights coming through the windows. This might be seen as a reference to Gursky's and Wenders's profession and their task to capture these sometimes so familiar but forgotten views of the world which are then re-discovered through their lenses.

'*Kathedrale I*' (2007) is a digital collage.<sup>252</sup> Collage, from the French word *coller* meaning 'to glue', originally described a pictorial technique that was first used by the Cubists, whereby different materials like paper, fabrics or foil, were stuck together on a surface to create another design or visual idea. Georges Braques and Pablo Picasso, who were in the forefront of experimentation with collage techniques (the so-called *papiers collés*), showed that the technical aspects of combining different materials were not important. The aim was to come closer to the depiction of reality and show that a realistic character of composition can be achieved through abstract forms combined in unnatural ways. The Cubists destroyed conventional pictorial reality with their

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<sup>251</sup> Email exchange with Andreas Gursky's Personal Assistant Annette Völker.

<sup>252</sup> Mendes Bürgi 2007.

collages,<sup>253</sup> an aim shared by Gursky when he points out his interest in the destruction of the pictorial character of photography,<sup>254</sup> and in his depiction of a gothic cathedral succeeds in doing so. The digital collage highlights, on the one hand, the essence of gothic churches and, on the other, is not representative of gothic churches at all, given that a gothic cathedral without columns cannot exist outside the digitally manipulated world of Andreas Gursky.

The idea of combining several images for a composition is part of an ongoing and gradual process which began in the early 1990s. Gursky's two images '*Schiesser, Diptychon*' (1991) depict the interior of a factory of Schiesser, the German company, drafted as two separate images next to each other and described as a diptych.<sup>255</sup> Another diptych is '*Cairo*' (1992), showing a bird's-eye view of a busy road crossing in Egypt.<sup>256</sup> The term 'diptych' refers to a composition that consists of two separate panels connected through a similar subject matter, and has traditionally been used to describe altar pieces with two side-wings. Gursky uses the term in its original sense for compositions that consist of two images. Galassi, however, applies the term to works of Gursky's which initially consisted of two pieces that were later joined digitally like '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993). Joining several perspectives through digital collage, as in '*Kathedrale I*' (2007), makes Gursky's work process increasingly complex.

One effect of digital collage is that the actual characteristics of the subject matter are realistically depicted, but – through selection and isolation of certain elements, and sometimes through repetition of structures and colours or a shortening of perspective, all applied digitally – these characteristics become condensed, often producing the appearance of ornamental patterning. Gursky tries to realize his subject matter through a well-balanced composition and with the necessary technique to reveal formal and essential elements of his object in a similar way to Steinert. '*Kathedrale I*' (2007) is an example of this approach: the essential elements of gothic architecture might be seen in the translucence and height of the inner sanctuary of the gothic cathedral, captured perfectly in the pointed arch glass windows. By removing their colourful appearance one begins to focus on their form, height and structure. The combination of several gothic windows next to each other, with no columns to obstruct the view in front of them, highlights the gothic style and elements in general.

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<sup>253</sup> Wescher 1974.

<sup>254</sup> See note 80.

<sup>255</sup> '*Schiesser*' (1991), diptych each 165x276 cm. Plate 60 in: Syring (ed.) 1998.

<sup>256</sup> '*Cairo*' (1992), diptych each 129.5x154.5 cm. Plates 42 and 43 in *ibid*.

Steinert also often focused on essential characteristics of his subject matter, highlighting them through radical perspectives and strict compositions with often technically demanding and highly experimental approaches, resulting in sometimes surreal-looking images.<sup>257</sup> In line with his concept of subjective photography, he isolated the subject matter from its surroundings and enhanced it through strict composition, paying particular attention to perspective, colours and tonal values; like Gursky, he would enhance the subject matter in an abstract fashion, if need be, in accordance with his own compositional guidelines.<sup>258</sup>

Such similarities to Steinert's method raise the question as to whether '*Kathedrale I*' (2007) bears the imprint of influence by the Bechers, who worked with strict standardized rules to capture their subject matter in an objective way for their serial typologies, avoiding any degree of personal, subjective influence. Their images are also exhibited in series to ensure that distinctive and essential elements of similar subject matters are emphasized. Here one might be able to see resemblance to Gursky's cathedral image as well, given that the visual vocabulary appears to be cool and distanced, untainted by personal touch. The row of gothic glass windows with their slight variations looks like a typology of gothic elements that has been assembled in one image. Gursky's educational background undoubtedly had a decisive influence upon his artistic work. There are elements in his work which are deeply rooted in the tradition of the Bechers and/or Otto Steinert, but one also has to bear in mind that he modified and developed his own method and style in accordance with technical developments which allowed him to produce digital collages like '*Kathedrale I*' (2007).

That leads to another question in relation to his educational background: how does Gursky find his subject matter? Steinert might have found some of his subject matter by chance. The Bechers, on the other hand, carried out meticulous research to find objects that fitted into their encyclopaedia of industrial types. Gursky's method of finding his subject matter is somewhat different. Sometimes he will go back to his own picture archive, or it can be a picture in a newspaper which attracts his attention, for example the image of the stock exchange in Tokyo.<sup>259</sup> On another occasion it was a project sponsored by the Siemens Kulturfond which, together with the photographer

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<sup>257</sup> Steinert had a preference for solarizations (images which are wholly or partly reversed in tone) and negative prints.

<sup>258</sup> Steinert 2006.

<sup>259</sup> '*Tokyo Stock Exchange*' (1990), 199x230 cm. Plate 11 in: Galassi 2003.



and curator Thomas Weski, led to the image '*Siemens, Karlsruhe*' (1991) that depicted the inside of a factory.<sup>260</sup>

Gursky's visual vocabulary is now so well known that people invite him to depict certain subject matters which they feel are 'Gursky-like', as for example when a Japanese neutrino observatory for research into elementary particles in the Mozumi mine deep below the town of Kamioka called to let Gursky know that there was a rare opportunity for him to take a shot of their underground water tank. The tank – and its thousands of photo-multipliers – that measures the radiation of the elementary particles, had to be repaired. So the water had to be drained, offering a rare opportunity to depict this surreal environment, resulting in '*Kamiokande*' (2007) (Plate 18). The image depicts the wall of the water tank with the sparkling photo-multipliers. In the foreground two small manned rubber dinghies float around the tank. The water at the bottom of the tank reflects the photo-multipliers from above, resulting in an endless panoramic view of golden-looking points in different shapes originating from the curved walls. Without an explanation of the origin of the subject matter it is almost impossible for the recipient to know what the image depicts.

'*Kamiokande*' (2007) spans a bridge between modern technology and art which has affiliations with the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In his view, all technical developments change the world, because human beings will use them under any circumstance; therefore technologies are an unpredictable danger. In order to provide an alternative to a purely technical worldview, Heidegger analysed modern technologies in comparison to art, pointing out that both are forms of discovery.<sup>261</sup> '*Kamiokande*' (2007) offers the spectator a glimpse of a technical underworld s/he would otherwise never be able to see. This photograph brings Gursky into a position where he is invited to events or to locations that are in need of recording: travelling around the world, he now enjoys '*the status of official world portraitist*', as the German *Art Magazine* has put it.<sup>262</sup>

After finding the right location or event, the photographer needs to find the right moment to capture his subject matter, and here Gursky has something in common with Henri Cartier-Bresson, his role model from his student years at the Folkwangschule. He aims to depict '*the decisive moment*', but in a very different way from its original meaning. '*The decisive moment*', as Cartier-Bresson defined it in the 1950s, originally

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<sup>260</sup> '*Siemens Karlsruhe*' (1991), 175.5x205.5 cm. Plate 10 in *ibid*.

<sup>261</sup> Heidegger 2000.

<sup>262</sup> Schlüter 2007.

depicted the climax of a plot standing as a symbol for the whole sequence of events. The image therefore should represent the essence of the plot.<sup>263</sup>

In his work, Gursky sometimes strengthens this essence through digital manipulation, as in his image *'Mayday V'* (2006) (Plate 19), which depicts the Westphalenhalle, a concert hall in Dortmund, Germany. The original building consists of four storeys. Gursky's building has eighteen storeys. Over a period of five hours he shot different images with different perspectives from a crane and later joined these images digitally without manipulating individual scenes. Gursky commented on this image: *'I have compressed the time in one image. In that sense the image is not true, but truthful.'*<sup>264</sup> The photograph seems to capture a condensation of the decisive and meaningful moments when visitors to that particular techno-rave event in Germany are standing at rest in the corridors of the concert hall. The photograph represents the distillation of a five-hour period, appearing more like a film still than a photograph.

And then again there is Gursky's interplay between a micro and a macro view. A close-up reveals a view through the lattice-windows into the corridors, stairwells and landings of the different levels of the concert hall. Everywhere tiny figures are walking along the corridors, leaning with their back to the window or looking outside and therefore, unintentionally, into an invisible camera lens. A German newspaper suggested that the image is also a self-portrait of Gursky, who is standing somewhere in one of the corridors, peering out of a window.<sup>265</sup> From a distance *'Mayday V'* (2006) reveals its ornamental structure; it thus becomes another reference to the colour-field paintings of the American Expressionists, similar to *'Paris, Montparnasse'* (1993) (Plate 20). In short, *'Mayday V'* (2006) depicts a macrocosmic structure of a black-lined grid (window frames) which appears sprinkled with colourful dots (the visitors' clothes). Digital manipulation, combined with the possibilities of photographic enlargement and new printing techniques, has allowed Gursky, from the early 1990s onwards, to realize some of these more complex pictorial ideas. It is arguable that he has created an emblematic oeuvre as, in a figurative sense, his images have similar characteristics to an emblem, in its original meaning.<sup>266</sup> The overall motto of Gursky's oeuvre seems to reveal itself by looking at his favoured subjects: places of work, consumption and leisure depicted all over the world, as he visualizes the phenomenon of globalization

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<sup>263</sup> Cartier-Bresson 2006, 78-82.

<sup>264</sup> Schlüter 2007, 53.

<sup>265</sup> Czöppan 2007.

<sup>266</sup> In 1531, Andrea Alciati defined in his *'Emblematum liber'* an emblem as consisting of a motto (*lemma*), a visual image (*icon*) and an explanatory verse (*epigram*): Homann 1971.

and its consequences. When asked about his main aim, he replied: '*I pursue only one goal: the encyclopaedia of life.*'<sup>267</sup> Here Gursky seems to be in accordance with the Bechers, who worked for a lifetime on their encyclopaedia of industrial architectures. He might not pursue his goal within their strict concept of serial photography, but something of the encyclopaedic project reappears in his oeuvre.

In the 1980s, Gursky's icons were less emblematic when produced without digital manipulation, given that they seem to be intended as *res pictae*, that is, objective recordings of his subject matter, a process that resulted in images like '*Gasherd*' (1980), '*Kirchfeldstraße*' (1980), '*Abstellraum*' (1981) and '*Hösel*' (1984). Most of these images from the early 1980s are marked by Gursky's distanced relationship to the subject matter, which avoids any interference. This changed in the early 1990s with his increasing use of digital techniques, resulting in some of his best-known pictures such as '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993), '*Prada I*' (1996), '*Chicago Board of Trade*' (1997) and '*Rhine II*' (1999). With digital manipulation, his icons were no longer simple pictorial recordings; they became, in the sense of an emblem, *res significantes*: depictions that exceed their status as simple recordings in order to offer another dimension and challenge the observer's understanding of the pictorial representation. In this way these images lose their indexical state because the picture, i.e. the subject matter, is no longer connected to its original source. Gursky was no longer interested, at least so it seems, in objective depiction. Digital manipulation allowed him to realize his visual ideas in a more personal way than before, even though these highly constructed images appear wearing the garment of documentary, often resulting in his favoured bird's-eye perspective and geometrical compositions. His compositions frequently include abstract and minimalistic elements, which become even more dominant through the interplay of the micro- and macrocosmic viewpoints of his large-scale images. A close-up reveals a graphical and a distanced look, disclosing an abstract or minimalistic world, like '*Untitled I*' (1993) (depicting a carpet), '*Untitled II*' (1993) (depicting a sunset) and '*Untitled III*' (1996) (depicting a sandy pathway). Since it is difficult to guess the subject matter within these pictures, there is space for comparison with abstract paintings. In Gursky's case, however, abstraction can become depiction in an instant. His digitally manipulated image '*Rhine II*' (1999), referring to hard-edged paintings and minimalistic sculptures, nevertheless mirrors the original object of depiction: a view of the river Rhine, artificially constructed, from which all disruptive elements have been removed. The abstraction in fact becomes an ideal of the depicted

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<sup>267</sup> Meister 2001.

Rhine; nowhere is it possible to find a view of the river without industrial buildings, calm and orderly in the way in which it is portrayed in this picture.

In 1998, Gursky remarked that his pictures had become '*increasingly more formal and abstract*', and he went on: '*A visual structure appears to dominate the real events shown in my picture. Apart from the constantly recurring elements I have mentioned, another aspect occurs to me which explains the way my pictures function. You never notice arbitrary details in my work. On a formal level, countless interrelated micro- and macrostructures are woven together, determined by an overall organizational principle. A closed microcosm which, thanks to my distanced attitude towards my subject, allows the viewer to recognize the hinges that hold the system together.*'<sup>268</sup> Gursky has certainly established a clearly recognizable visual vocabulary through recurrent elements in his compositions and his preference for distinctive subject matter. Like the author of an emblem who would challenge his reader's intellect with the interpretation of his icon and epigram, he visualizes '*the hinges that hold [our global] system together*' through the depiction of his condensed visual experience, whether analogue or digital, that have become emblems of our global surroundings.

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<sup>268</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

### **III. Images of Our Time: Jeff Wall, 'a Painter of Modern Life'<sup>269</sup>**

#### **1. 'Filming in One Shot Only':<sup>270</sup> Decoding the Photographic Tableau**

The Canadian photographer Jeff Wall<sup>271</sup> has played a key role in establishing contemporary photography as an art form, particularly in regard to his construction of photographic tableaux which could compete in scale and appearance with paintings and therefore made their way into galleries and museums. David Campany has described him as: '*Perhaps the most influential artist to reconnect photography to social descriptions of the everyday.*'<sup>272</sup> Wall, a trained art historian, disliked small-format prints and set out to produce photographs in a similar way to paintings, so that they would consequently be experienced like paintings. His photographs are concerned with everyday life; they relate and adopt a modified version of Charles Baudelaire's 19<sup>th</sup>-century concept of the '*Painter of Modern Life*',<sup>273</sup> which challenged artists to focus on day-to-day life in order to understand modernity and capture its essence in their work. In Baudelaire's world-view a painter possessed the ability to accumulate a number of individual actions and sittings in one pictorial expression, whereas the new medium of photography was characterized by its inability to blend different moments into one image and therefore to reflect the essence of modernity. Photography claimed

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<sup>269</sup> Baudelaire 1964b.

<sup>270</sup> Wenders 2001.

<sup>271</sup> Jeff Wall (b. 1946) lives and works in Vancouver, Canada, where he was born. In the 1970s he became interested in the history of film, paintings and photography. He studied art history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where he received his MA in 1971. He studied at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London 1970-73, where he finished his Canadian MA. During the following year, 1974-75, he worked as assistant professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He worked as an associate professor at Simon Fraser University 1976-87 and later taught at the University of British Columbia. In 1976, he started working with colour photography and since 1991 has been using digital techniques. In Düsseldorf Wall met Richter, who was a professor of painting 1971-93. From 1995, Wall began producing large black and white photographs. In 1996, according to Ulf Erdmann Ziegler (2002), Wall replaced Bernd Becher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy but resigned immediately on being threatened with a gun by a former student of the Bechers.

<sup>272</sup> Campany (ed.) 2004, 29.

<sup>273</sup> Baudelaire 1964b.

to be an objective depiction of the world, but it lacked, in Baudelaire's view, creative and interpretive potential to explain society and its manifold social and political problems.<sup>274</sup> Wall, however, especially after discovering the range of possibilities that computer programmes offered, realized that he could use the medium of photography in a similar fashion, albeit almost a century later, in the way in which Baudelaire's '*Painter of Modern Life*' had used the brush. The computer gave him more power than before to blur the boundaries of photographic images, and to assemble several single shots into one image in order to simulate and present the privileged genuine moment painting had exclusively claimed for itself. Wall's demand for equality in rank of photograph to painting succeeded also through his choice of presentation. Since the late 1970s, he has presented his images as large-scale cibachrome transparencies back-lit by fluorescent bulbs, a form of presentation so closely linked with the advertising industry that it is difficult not to expect commercial connotations in Wall's work. The commercial lightbox, mainly used by the advertising industry, illuminates images from behind, creating an almost three-dimensional effect which, combined with their large-scale measurements, grabs the attention of the onlooker and almost drags him into the image. Through its vibrant illumination and life size, the lightbox creates a vast physical presence for a public space, a characteristic that Wall used for his first work '*The Destroyed Room*' (1978) (Plate 21). Rather than displaying the image at its first exhibition on the gallery wall, he placed the lightbox in the window, where it could be seen from the street, nearly causing some car accidents at the time.<sup>275</sup>

Wall's fellow Canadian artist Roy Arden remarked about the exhibit: '*I was driving down Fourth Avenue and noticed a large back-lit colour image in the window of the Nova [Gallery]. From a distance, it had the appearance of an advertisement, but there was no text and it didn't read from a distance the way bus stops and billboards do. I later returned to discover it was Jeff Wall's exhibition in which "The Destroyed Room" had been placed before the gallery's open window.*'<sup>276</sup> The idea of exhibiting his photographs in such a fashion came during a trip to Europe in 1977. While travelling by bus from Spain to London Wall saw '*these back-lit things at the bus terminals. And it just clicked that those back-lit pictures might be a way of doing photography that would somehow connect these elements of scale and the body that were important to Judd*

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<sup>274</sup> In Baudelaire's view the Daguerreotype was not remotely suited to capturing any aspect of everyday life, given the lengthy sitting time in front of the camera and the highly complicated and mechanical production process required. Baudelaire 1977.

<sup>275</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>276</sup> Arden 2005.

and Newman and Pollock, as well as Velázquez, Goya, Titian or Manet.<sup>277</sup> By using the back-lit box for his photograph Wall had in a way created a form of photographic presentation that could be electrically illuminated and therefore ‘switched on or off’, combining in that sense elements of photography, film and painting or, as Wall notes: ‘there was the perfect synthetic technology for me. It was not photography, it was not cinema, it was not painting, it was not propaganda, but it has strong associations with them all.’<sup>278</sup> Given his conviction that painting was not the best way to depict modern life, the back-lit box offered him a form of presentation that could compete with painting by intensifying colours, light and shade. It also offered a more three-dimensional feeling than a photograph or a painting ever could and, moreover, associations with television or cinema are increased, especially when a back-lit photograph is presented in a darkened exhibition space which produces, at first sight, the illusion of a film still on a screen. This form of presentation mirrors Wall’s intention to blur the boundaries of otherwise separate art genres, combining different representational media to create a modern form of photographic expression that can be described as ‘*photographic painting*’.<sup>279</sup>

Wall’s presentation form and style have also acted as a precedent for Gursky’s works.<sup>280</sup> Several of Gursky’s photographs from the 1990s and 2000s often appear in a documentary disguise hiding the great expenditure of the staging process that has taken place, an element which one might also associate with advertising. Gursky, as the son and grandson of commercial photographers knows, even better than Wall perhaps, the aims and aesthetics of promotional representation, whereby a commercial message is concealed behind an appealing and universally usable photographic surface. Now, although Gursky’s images are not advertising, they bear elements reminiscent of this trade, in particular aesthetic pictorial forms which appeal to and are understood by a global society. His images are universally usable: they exhibit little, if anything, that could be construed as controversial from a political, religious or social perspective. Even their physical appearance, not unlike that of Wall’s works, resembles that of commercial images: finished with a high-gloss *Diasec* surface, which makes colours appear very vibrant, and produced with large-scale measurements, these images engage with the spectator in a very realistic way, offering a life-size depiction of their subject matter.

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<sup>277</sup> Burnett 2005a, 9.

<sup>278</sup> Lauter (ed.) 2001, 20-21.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>280</sup> In particular his series ‘*Security Guards*’ (1982-85) and ‘*Giordano Bruno*’ (1989).

Wall's and Gursky's images are made for public spaces and not for an intimate domestic setting; that is why these commercial modes of display work so well. Both artists combine commercial elements with a plethora of detail, which seeks the attention of the recipient in a similar way to an oversized billboard, but at the same time, given their content and visible references to art-historical sources, compete with painting as well.

Wall's work and presentation was seen as so innovative at the time that, after his first one-man show in 1978 at the Nova Gallery in Vancouver, where he exhibited *'The Destroyed Room'* (1978) in a back-lit box, the National Gallery of Canada immediately purchased this work for their permanent collection. This success brought him international recognition and three years later, in 1981, Wall exhibited his work at the *'Westkunst'* exhibition, curated by Kasper König, an inclusion that later led to an invitation to the *'Documenta'* in 1982. Wall also became a visiting artist, until 1985, at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf; here he met Gursky in the Bechers' class. Wall's work and in particular the use of vast dimensions and illuminated colours left an impression on the then thirty-two-year-old Gursky. After graduating in 1987, he exhibited his series *'Security Guards'* (1982-85) at Düsseldorf airport as large-scale transparencies in back-lit boxes, a presentation form invented by Wall which Gursky has never used again. Gursky's *'Giordano Bruno'* (1989) is another example that bears a resemblance to Wall's work, in that the image portrays a scene in a narrative style which would commonly be ascribed to Wall's work.<sup>281</sup> When Gursky was asked in 1992 whether his work relied on that of other artists, he replied: *'I am in such a tough spot with Jeff Wall. I have made pictures that you would readily take for a Jeff Wall. But these I won't show. I know that I admire him, he is a great model for me. I am trying to get along with that in the most honest way possible and to let the influence run its course.'*<sup>282</sup> One of the images which Gursky was reluctant to publish is *'Giordano Bruno'* (1989), which depicts two men engaged in conversation sitting on a bench on a sand-dune. The title of this image refers to their subject of conversation: the Italian 16<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Giordano Bruno. The incidental character of the shoot and its narrative composition refers to Wall's work.

Wall has invented three categories for his work; he distinguishes between *'cinematographic'*, *'near-documentary'* and *'documentary'* photographs. *'Cinematographic'* images are scenes staged in his studio, on large sets or at exterior locations, often including actors and costumes, and use techniques which one would

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<sup>281</sup> Galassi 2003, 31.

<sup>282</sup> Seelig 1992; see also Galassi 2003, 31, 44, footnote 45.



ascribe to a film production; they therefore often combine the narrative element of a film plot with the incidental character of street photography. The production of these images is often based on Wall's previous, meticulous research about the subject matter in order to ensure authenticity. 'Near-documentary' images occupy a middle ground between the other two categories, referring to scenes that were actually witnessed by Wall and later staged, for example 'Restoration' (1993), staging the restoration of the Bourbaki Panorama (1881) by Édouard Castres a 360-degree painting displayed in Lucerne, Switzerland. A third category are 'documentary' images, i.e. straight photographs which exclude any sort of artificially constructed interference by respecting the subject matter for its plain *mimesis* and therefore belonging to the tradition of 'straight photography'; for example, the urban landscapes and suburban surroundings in 'Steves Farm, Steveston' (1980) or 'Still Creek, Vancouver, Winter 2003' (2003).

In regard to Wall's oeuvre one can establish three main groups: landscapes, street scenes and interiors. His landscapes often include strange details or plots, like 'An Eviction' (1988-2004). This is a wide-angled shot of a densely built-up suburban estate; houses are close to each other, there are parked cars and people walking around, but right in the centre of this photograph, hardly noticeable at first gaze, an eviction is taking place. Two uniformed men try to drag away a man who puts up a fierce resistance; they are followed by a woman who runs after them, gesturing dramatically. The second category comprises street scenes; these are often staged with a great deal of expenditure, for example 'Mimic' (1982), which captures a scene of racial abuse between a Caucasian couple and an Asian man. Here the decisive moment of the abuse is constructed and composed in line with the representational idea of *mimesis*, expressed not only in the content of the image but also in its fine composition. The last group comprises Wall's interiors; these often depict scenes that can have reference to painting, like 'Picture for Women' (1979), after Manet's masterpiece; or one finds images that have their origins in passages of literature, like 'After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue' (1999-2000).<sup>283</sup>

During the mid-1970s Wall worked at an independent cinema in Vancouver, where he had to check the condition of the film print frame by frame. He later remarked about this period: 'That's when I started to appreciate film as photography and I started to think that this was akin to painting and to writing poetry.'<sup>284</sup> Henceforth the principle of film became a foundation for his photographs, in particular his 'cinematographic'

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<sup>283</sup> Both images will be discussed in detail in the following text.

<sup>284</sup> Burnett 2005a, 10.

images, and even his '*documentary*' category. Wall began to work like a film director with a crew on a film set, sometimes casting actors beforehand and designing a back-drop. '*Mimic*' (1982), for example, united a plain documentary style, which one would ascribe to street photography, with Wall's cinematographic ambitions by employing actors, creating a set, and directing light and movement, only to 'freeze' the scene in one shot. This, combined with the presentation of his images as enlarged transparencies in back-lit boxes, offered connotations of history painting and at the same time referred to film stills which made his work far more complex and much more difficult to decode. When Wall discovered digital technology in the 1990s, his suite of composition techniques, stylistic elements and ambitious subject matter grew even further. The construction of images at the computer allowed Wall to unite composition techniques that originated in film and painting and to include subject matters that could be rooted in literature or fine art – e.g. painting ('*Picture for Women*' (1979)) or wood block print ('*A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*' (1993)) – or could refer to philosophical concepts (e.g. Baudelaire or Auerbach).

This chapter charts Wall's journey from young art history student, interested in the history of film, painting and photography, to highly sophisticated and well-marketed artist and photographer, whose prolific literary output is aimed at controlling his own image and the understanding and origin of his artistic works. The chapter will investigate how Wall has modified and utilized Baudelaire's concept of '*the Painter of Modern Life*' for his work, as well as examining Wall's categories and the production process of '*cinematographic*', '*near-documentary*' and '*documentary*' photographs in regard to the history of photography. Additionally the chapter also tries to establish the origins of these categories and looks at literary and pictorial models for his compositions. Finally, it focuses on the changes and possibilities which came about through the use of digital manipulation and its influence on composition techniques and style.

## **2. The Post-Modern Flâneur: Setting out 'To See the World'**<sup>285</sup>

In the early 1970s, while studying in London, Wall discovered an interest in the complexities of large-scale pre-20<sup>th</sup> century painting, as he later remarked: *'I just became convinced that I didn't want to do alternatives to traditional art – I wanted to do traditional art, make big pictures. If you look at Velázquez and Cézanne and think, those two are more important to me than Warhol or Joseph Beuys, then you have to act on it. And I knew I wanted to be involved in pictorial art, my first affection and enthusiasm.'*<sup>286</sup> Guided by a general interest in art history and art that was influenced by the conceptual and experimental approach of the Avant-garde, Wall set out to aspire to the ideas of traditional art and to realize them through his medium of choice: photography.

In his early teens, Wall painted in his parents' garden shed, visited exhibitions and studied artworks. In the end, he decided to study not fine arts but art history, and graduated with an MA thesis titled *'Berlin Dada and the Notion of Context'* from the University of British Columbia. From 1970 to 1973 he undertook postgraduate studies at the Courtauld Institute in London, but never submitted a thesis; instead he finished his Canadian MA.<sup>287</sup> Wall was particularly interested in the political aspects of works by John Heartfield, also known as Helmut Herzfeld, who used photomontage and satirical posters to question the social status quo and to criticize capitalism and fascism. Wall attempted an interpretation of Herzfeld's work based on the thoughts of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx<sup>288</sup> and later remarked about this time: *'I got interested in Heartfield in the atmosphere of the counterculture and politics of the 1960s. He was one of the major models for the critiques of the time, and different energies were circulating in the reception of his work then. I went to London to study him further, but, by around 1971, I'd become pretty disappointed, and realized that he just wasn't as significant as an artist as I'd previously thought he was.'*<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Baudelaire 1964b.

<sup>286</sup> Denes 2005.

<sup>287</sup> According to the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, Wall seems not to have submitted a thesis (the Courtauld's electronic system holds records only of students who completed their degrees).

<sup>288</sup> Lauter (ed.) 2001, 15.

<sup>289</sup> Chevrier 2007a.

However, through his MA dissertation, Wall became familiar with the Dada movement, an art form that combined different art genres, politics and literature. Dadaism flourished between 1915 and 1922 and used collages, photomontage, ready-mades<sup>290</sup> and performance to protest against the dominant self-sufficiency and ivory-towered attitude of the established art world, focusing especially on traditional media such as painting and sculpture. In order to be creative and relate to people's life, art was seen as something that should be developed by chance and be concerned with daily life and nature in general. The Berlin Dada group, including the Herzfeld brothers and George Grosz and Franz Jung, amongst others, was mainly concerned with changes in society and culture, which often resulted in a very conceptual work approach as well as critical and politicized artworks. John Heartfield, for example, made numerous photomontages which mirrored the political conflicts between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Berlin Dada group and then went on to '*study Conceptual art and art criticism more closely*', which led him towards aesthetics.<sup>291</sup> Once asked about his art history degree, Wall said: '*I got involved in art history through thinking about the problems I was facing in my studio. I studied this stuff not to become an art historian, as people seem to think, but as a way to get some distance and clarity on it for my own purposes.*'<sup>292</sup> Through his research Wall discovered how this particular movement combined a conceptual, philosophical and political mixture in their works in order to question the bourgeois structures that existed after the First World War.

While undertaking his postgraduate studies from 1970 to 1973 at the Courtauld Institute in London, Wall became inspired by Édouard Manet's late masterpiece '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882), which was donated by the Samuel Courtauld Trust in 1934 to the Courtauld Institute Collection and has ever since fascinated and influenced the work of students, among them art historian and former student of the Courtauld Institute Timothy James Clark.<sup>293</sup> Clark published two books in 1973 based on his doctoral work about mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century French art and politics which brought him international recognition.<sup>294</sup> In 1984, he also published '*The Painting of Modern Life*:

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<sup>290</sup> Art term invented by Marcel Duchamp for randomly selected mass-produced objects, which were then 'granted' the status of art.

<sup>291</sup> Chevrier 2007a.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>293</sup> Courtauld Institute of Art n.d.

<sup>294</sup> Clark 1973a; Clark 1973b.

*Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*,<sup>295</sup> which devotes an entire chapter to Manet's painting in conjunction with Baudelaire's concept of '*The Painter of Modern Life*'.<sup>296</sup> Clark's work provided the field of art history with new methodological insights stemming from artworks without limiting them to stylistic or iconographic categories. For him, art was an expression of its social and political circumstances as well as the intellectual understanding of the artist and the recipient. Clark showed the political and social implications which artworks could have, in particular those by Manet and Courbet, and that 19<sup>th</sup>-painting was embedded in a dynamic social relationship with its contemporary moment. His intervention inaugurated a period in the writing of western art history of intense political scrutiny, one which arguably mirrored the current cultural and social turmoil outside the sphere of academia. Clark's published work on 19<sup>th</sup>-century art and politics in France focused on the beginning of modernity in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when a debate had started about the end of modernism and the beginning of a post-modern era. It was also the time when Pop Art was at its height: an art movement that rejected traditional subject matters, and that was influenced by popular culture and embraced in a way Baudelaire's idea that artworks had to be concerned with modern everyday life. Clark's publications heralded a period of refocusing on the work of French poets and critics such as Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. In particular, Baudelaire's essay '*The Painter of Modern Life*' (written in 1863), which originally praised the work of the illustrator Constantin Guys (1802-92)<sup>297</sup>, revived the idea that art must be a reflection of its time. Wall soon got interested in Baudelaire's expression '*the painting of modern life*', which in his opinion best characterized his aims as an artist. Baudelaire had pleaded in his essay '*The Painter of Modern Life*' for artists to begin to paint modern subjects and generally to be interested in modernity in order to create new and relevant artworks, which would treat the fleeting nature of the contemporary in monumental manner. He explained his use of the term 'modernity' in this way: '*Something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance [...] that quality which you must allow me to call modernity*'.<sup>298</sup> He

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<sup>295</sup> Dictionary of Art Historians n.d.

<sup>296</sup> Clark 1984, 205-258.

<sup>297</sup> Baudelaire's expression '*the painting of modern life*', however, is mainly associated with the works of the Impressionists and in particular with Édouard Manet (1832-83).

<sup>298</sup> Baudelaire 1964b, 12. '*And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert – has an aim loftier than that of a mere flâneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of*

criticized artists whose works mainly featured scenes based on antiquity and classical mythology and which dominated the *Salon* at the time: *'Casting an eye over our exhibitions of modern pictures, we are struck by a general tendency among artists to dress all their subjects in the garments of the past.'*<sup>299</sup> However, Baudelaire was not opposed to the idea of studying the Old Masters or of learning from their techniques but he also warned: *'It can be no more than a waste of labour if your aim is to understand the special nature of the present-day beauty.'*<sup>300</sup> For him *'the painter of today'* needed to be a *'flâneur'*, *'a passionate spectator'*, someone who was *'at the centre of the world and yet [...] [remained] hidden from the world.'*<sup>301</sup> Wall seems to aspire to Baudelaire's account of the *'flâneur'* who depicts modern life, as he noted in an interview: *'The idea of "the painting of modern life", which I've liked very much for many years, seemed to me just the most open, flexible, and rich notion of what artistic aims might be like, meaning that Baudelaire was asking or calling for artists to pay close attention to the everyday and the now.'*<sup>302</sup> Baudelaire's account that relevant art has to be concerned with modernity was a challenge for artists of his time. On the one hand, they had to adopt a position as detached observers and, on the other, they had to find their role as critics of society and politics. Clark's research at the Courtauld Institute, if Wall was aware of it or read up on it later, would have presented him with a clearer picture, firstly, of the extent to which these 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists were immersed in *'everyday life'* and reflected its social circumstances and political attitudes; secondly, how much these attitudes were mirrored in their work; and thirdly, of the impact their artworks had on the actual social and political circumstances of the time.

Wall also admits that he is *'intrigued by the sense of the common which was made significant by the rise of the everyday, the concept of the everyday that was part of the origin of modern art. With the notion of the everyday came the idea of the unspecial*

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*circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call "modernity"; for I know of no better word to express the idea I have in mind.'*

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>301</sup> Baudelaire 1964a, 9. *'For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.'*

<sup>302</sup> Shapiro 2007.

people, the unchosen people.<sup>303</sup> These 'unchosen people' can be seen in several of Wall's images. He confronts the viewer with social realities and their consequences, for example in 'Mimic' (1982), which depicts a street scene with racist content. He captures cultural problems of our global society, as in 'The Storyteller' (1986), which depicts the alienation of a native Canadian woman seated in the grass with two other people; she is telling a story next to a concrete overpass in the modern metropolis. Wall points out that '*Baudelaire managed to project a possible form of art far into the future. The "Painting of modern life" can be painting, photography, cinema, anything; it may be the most open model for art ever formulate.*'<sup>304</sup> The term also refers, as he remarks, to '*an attitude of looking, reflecting and making.*'<sup>305</sup>

One constructive way of detecting the extent to which Clark's art-historical work and therefore a Baudelaire-inspired '*attitude*', as well as the visual vocabulary of painting, have influenced Wall's approach and execution of photography is by analysing his first lightbox, 'The Destroyed Room' (1978). Wall's decision to model 'The Destroyed Room' after Eugène Delacroix's painting 'Death of Sardanapalus' (1827-28) (Plate 22) is probably not a coincidence, given that Delacroix was very much admired by Baudelaire. Although Baudelaire referred to Delacroix as a good friend, they seem to have met rarely and after 1857 Delacroix avoided any sort of contact with his admirer.<sup>306</sup> Baudelaire saw in Delacroix, along with Constantin Guys, the quintessence of a true 19<sup>th</sup>-century painter who chose excellent *sujets* which were painted in an extraordinary creative style with a carefully applied colour palette.<sup>307</sup> However, Baudelaire mainly focused on Delacroix's ability to express his emotions through his painting and often summarized them, as Elisabeth Hirschberger remarks, in terms of '*mélancolie*', '*douleur morale*' and '*passion*', a view that displeased Delacroix.<sup>308</sup> In Baudelaire's view Delacroix's creative imagination in particular enabled him not simply to reproduce his subject matter, but to transfer his constructed complex artistic vision onto a canvas. The artist would thus sacrifice the realistic appearance of his subject matter in order to create a painting that presented exclusively his creative imagination.<sup>309</sup> Baudelaire recognized that the idea of a mimetic painting, i.e. a

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<sup>303</sup> Chevrier 2001, 168.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>305</sup> Shapiro 2007.

<sup>306</sup> Hirschberger 1993, 15.

<sup>307</sup> Moog-Grünwald/Rodiek (eds.) 1989.

<sup>308</sup> Hirschberger 1993, 14.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

reproductive representation of reality, would be developed over time in favour of a more personal, interpretative representation. Interestingly, Baudelaire's idea, maybe unconsciously, can also be found in the '*Four Finishing Elements of Photographic Production*' (1955) by Otto Steinert, for whom simple reproductive representation had no artistic standing whereas abstract representation becomes the highest form the creative mind can produce.<sup>310</sup> Hirschberger has pointed out that Delacroix's style '*of applying colour with a loose stroke of the brush*' paved the way for abstract paintings after taking a circuitous route through Impressionism.<sup>311</sup> Therefore when Baudelaire analysed colours and their representational value in Delacroix's paintings, he also anticipated that painters would in a way aim for non-reproductive representations at some point.<sup>312</sup> Baudelaire admired Delacroix's work for its imaginative depiction far from any sort of plain reproduction of reality that allowed the painting to become an expression of the artist's mind. In the case of '*The Death of Sardanapalus*' it became all too much for some spectators of the *Salon* in 1827-28, as is shown by Étienne-Jean Delecluze's harsh comment: '*Sardanapalus is a mistake on the part of the painter.*'<sup>313</sup>

Delacroix's uncommissioned painting depicts the Assyrian king, who, after learning about his military defeat, orders his guards to kill his concubines, servants and horse, to destroy his possessions and set fire to his palace, before committing suicide.<sup>314</sup> The painting shows the disturbing moment of chaos and violence while the guards follow Sardanapalus's order. The king is depicted in the background, lying emotionless in his bed, gazing in the direction of the nude woman in the foreground whose throat is to be cut in the next moment. On the right side of the bed a woman hangs herself; while in front of her a servant is close to stabbing another nude woman. Behind these figures in the upper right-hand corner the burning palace can be seen. Next to the king stands his servant with a jug containing the poison that will allow him a peaceful death. On the left side in the bottom corner a black slave is killing a horse. The diagonal lines of the bed as a centre piece divide the image into zones: the back- and middleground is mainly dominated by the king who reclines calmly in his bed. The foreground and the remaining middleground that surrounds the bed constitute the space in which the devastation and murder take place. This gruesome spectacle has its textual origins in the play '*Sardanapalus*' by Lord Byron. The spectator is captured by the extraordinary

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<sup>310</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>311</sup> Hirschberger 1993, 12.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Jobert 1998.

<sup>314</sup> Ziegler/Sontheimer (eds.) 1979, Vol. 4, 1550-1551.



beauty and vibrant colours of the figures but, at the same time, has to face the horrendous and violent scene, a fact that caused huge offence to the audience of the *Salon*, as Étienne-Jean Delecluze's further remarks illustrate: '*M. Delacroix's Sardanapalus found favour neither with the public nor with the artists. One tried in vain to get at the thoughts entertained by the painter in composing his work; the intelligence of the viewer could not penetrate the subject, the elements of which are isolated, where the eye cannot find its way within the confusion of lines and colours, where the first rules of art seem to have deliberately violated.*'<sup>315</sup> What was appreciated by Baudelaire was clearly rejected by the contemporary audience, whom Delacroix made into voyeurs of a delirious violent orgy. In this theatrical *mise en scène* the spectator, like the depicted king, becomes a voyeur watching curiously and emotionless the fate of the concubines and slaves in his possession. In addition, Delacroix broke with traditional neo-classical composition by applying a controversial colour scheme and choosing a large-scale format for his painting. However, the composition, i.e. the unusual use of the picture space, proved to be the most controversial point. The audience of the *Salon* from 1827-28 would have been used to a planimetric composition which structured the subject matter through a geometric grid of horizontal and vertical lines, often offering a symmetric composition. Furthermore, Delacroix rejected the conventional choice of subject matter, which often related to Renaissance classicism in its choice of antique architecture and idealized figures from classical statuary. However, more artists were beginning to reject classicism, as Clark points out: '*Mallarmé shrugs off the history of art since the Renaissance as so many attempts "to decorate the ceiling of salons and palaces with a crowd of idealized types in magnificent foreshortening".*'<sup>316</sup> Baudelaire expressed a similar criticism when pointing out that there were so many artists who were dominated by classical traditions, painting '*all their subjects in the garments of the past*',<sup>317</sup> he therefore admired Delacroix for his modern approach, an attitude that might have inspired Wall as well when he decided to model '*The Destroyed Room*' (1978) after Delacroix's painting. Asked about the latter, Wall replied: '*When I first started making these photographs I thought it was important to make a definite reference to other works.*'<sup>318</sup>

'*The Destroyed Room*' (1978) depicts a completely ransacked room. The red painted walls are destroyed and plaster has fallen off the wall, exposing the insulation.

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<sup>315</sup> Cited after: Jobert 1998.

<sup>316</sup> Clark 1984, 267. Original quotation by Mallarmé in: Mallarmé 1876.

<sup>317</sup> Baudelaire 1964b, 12.

<sup>318</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

The window on the right side is broken and its curtains torn apart. The door frame on the left side has literally been ripped out of place. Through the door frame one sees the studio wall and the boards that support the stage design. In the left corner a chest of drawers seems to have been opened violently; its contents are hanging from every drawer. The bed frame and mattress, which is slashed diagonally, have been tipped over, as has a cream-coloured table. Most of the items on the floor seem to be women's clothes and accessories like jewellery, sunglasses and a straw hat. The only item left untouched is a small statue of a female, maybe made out of porcelain, standing on the chest of drawers and illuminated by beam of light casting a delicate shadow onto the wall behind. The figure seems to be dancing: her arms are open wide and hold the ends of her long greenish skirt; she moves elegantly with one very fragile leg in front of the other and reigns over the total devastation that has taken place.

Here, Wall has transferred the general subject and elements of Delacroix's composition into his image, but with a slight, but important discrepancy: the bed from where Sardanapalus directed the fate of his household, in the original painting the only place unharmed by events, is in Wall's image destroyed like the rest of the room; above all, in a symbolic manner, a small porcelain statue, a dancing woman, now presides over the scene of destruction.

Wall's image in comparison with Delacroix's portrays the aftermath of the incident, not the actual rage itself. Set in a domestic environment, the recipient becomes a witness to the devastation as to the unbearable calmness that lies upon it. Wall became interested in Delacroix's '*Death of Sardanapalus*' (1827-28) while lecturing on Romanticism;<sup>319</sup> actual work on '*The Destroyed Room*' started in 1978, the year when his wife Jeanette left him for another man. It could be speculated that like '*Death of Sardanapalus*' this is a picture of male vengeance. Wall used his former wife's clothes and jewellery to stage the scene, explaining this decision with the rational comment: '*I borrowed her clothes because we were still on good terms and she had the good clothes.*'<sup>320</sup>

At the time Wall was even keener to pursue his artistic career and '*to continue an idea of historically and theoretically informed production*'.<sup>321</sup> He therefore used Delacroix's painting, which is based on historical facts recorded by the Greek historian

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>320</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>321</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

Ktesias,<sup>322</sup> and with Baudelaire's concept of '*the Painter of Modern Life*'<sup>323</sup> in mind transferred Delacroix's composition '*to the design of commercial window displays of clothing and furniture*'<sup>324</sup> or, in Wall's words, '*It was important to filter "The Destroyed Room" through this other picture [The Death of Sardanapalus]*'.<sup>325</sup> Wall *filtered* his pictorial idea through Delacroix's composition very much in line with Baudelaire's idea of creating an artwork that presented the individual and creative imagination of the artist and his time. Firstly, Wall adopted Delacroix's diagonal composition for his image. A diagonal line runs through the composition from the chest of drawers in the upper left corner through the slashed mattress and the table down to the lower right corner, stopping at a broken rattan chair. Not unlike in Delacroix's painting, this main diagonal line divides the image into zones: the back- and middleground behind the mattress and bed (not visible), and the foreground and the remaining middleground in front of the bed and table where the devastation has taken place. Baudelaire's idea of creating an artwork that is concerned and related to daily life is taken into consideration in regard to the design of commercial window displays: everything that needs to be seen is displayed and can be seen from a frontal viewpoint, which even allows a glimpse behind the stage set through the door frame on the left side. This glimpse behind the scene is a particularly striking aspect of Wall's composition. First of all, it displays the fact that the photograph has been '*arranged, constructed and staged*', a photographic practice that has been well known since the 1980s.<sup>326</sup> However, Wall allows the construction process to be made visible. The spectator sees the interior brick wall of his studio and the wooden stakes that support the walls of the stage set. This visibility of the creative process is an attribute which would be normally ascribed to '*Aktionskunst*', performance art or happenings, in which artists often document the creative construction process of the artwork through photographs.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Ziegler/Sontheimer (eds.) 1979, Vol. 3, 366. Ktesias was a Greek writer and historian who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Most of his work is lost, but is known through the work of Diodor. Ibid., Vol. 4, 1550-51.

<sup>323</sup> Baudelaire 1964b.

<sup>324</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>326</sup> Köhler (ed.) 1989, 15-16.

<sup>327</sup> For example the French artist Yves Klein (1928-62) made paintings using 'living paintbrushes': he directed nude women covered in paint to roll on the canvas on the floor. These 'actions' were presented in art galleries and reached a wider audience only through numerous photographic documents. Klein-Krahmer 1974.

In regard to the category of staged photography it is worth noting that Wall refrained from the idea of simply re-staging Delacroix's painting with actors;<sup>328</sup> instead his photograph – in which the subject matter is arranged as a still life – makes more of an intellectual reference to *'The Death of Sardanapalus'* (1827-28). And like Delacroix, Wall chose an asymmetrical composition, an unusual colour scheme, an unusual subject matter and a large-scale format for an unaccustomed form of presentation in a back-lit box.

During the previous summer, in 1977, Wall had taken his family on a bus trip round Europe and Morocco. The consequences of this journey for his professional life, in particular his visit to the unique collection of Madrid's Prado and his encounter with an advertising lightbox at a bus shelter in the middle of France, are well known,<sup>329</sup> and caused Wall to throw himself enthusiastically into the production of lightbox transparencies for his first show at the Nova Gallery in Vancouver. The consequences for his private life are probably less well known: with his wife leaving him, in a split that lasted until the 1990s, maybe resulting from his frantic search for *'his theoretical relations with Conceptual art'* and his wish to establish himself as an artist, and after a period spent lecturing in Vancouver and London, Wall began to devote himself exclusively to his career.<sup>330</sup> When the journalist Arthur Lubow suggested that *"The Destroyed Room" revolved around a spurned husband's rage'*, he replied that he had not felt particularly angry at the time and went on: *'I don't find my own experiences very interesting. I find my observations interesting.'*<sup>331</sup> Wall could not have been angered by the developments for too long, as he stayed in touch with his wife and children and they appeared in some of his image, mostly portraits or genre scenes with a domestic setting, over the following years. He photographed his wife a year after their split, together with his father, a doctor, for the image *'Woman and her Doctor'* (1980-81). He also depicted his sons; one appeared in a full-length portrait in *'Backpack'* (1981-82) and five years later in *'The Smoker'* (1986). His other son can be seen in *'The Guitarist'* (1987). It might well be seen as a professional achievement for an exceptional artist that Wall was able to cope with the separation from his wife on a rational and intellectual level, channelling his thoughts and eventually his feelings through the

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<sup>328</sup> See also the work of Wall's mentor Ian Wallace, Chapter IV. Wallace made a re-staged photograph of Caravaggio's *'La Vocazione di San Matteo'* (1599-1600) with some of his friends, including Jeff Wall.

<sup>329</sup> Burnett 2005a, 9; Wagstaff 2005b, 7.

<sup>330</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

<sup>331</sup> Lubow 2007.

complex world of Delacroix's painting of the Napoleonic period, creating a fascinating artwork. On a more personal level, one might see Wall's reconciliation with his wife as the real achievement, after she ended her relationship with another man and returned to Wall with a child whom they decided to raise together.<sup>332</sup> Wall has always maintained his position that he '*was not that pleased*' about the split; however he '*was not displeased on another level*'.<sup>333</sup> His private situation at the time allowed him to concentrate on his career.

### **3. 'I Begin by Not Photographing':<sup>334</sup>**

#### **Cinematographic, Near-documentary and Documentary Photographs**

Wall's '*documentary images*' are straight photographs which exclude any sort of artificially constructed interference by respecting the subject matter for its plain *mimesis*, such as the image '*Dawn*' (2001) (Plate 23). The photograph captures a street scene in the early hours of the morning. It depicts the corner of a pavement dominated by a large rock next to a telephone pole and an electricity pylon further behind. In the background on the left a mesh-fence provides a boundary with a green field and its suburban buildings surrounded by still-lit street lights. On the roof of one of the buildings is an advertisement hoarding promoting a *Harry Potter* film. The sky appears slightly pink and lilac, providing a soft contrast to the depicted industrial environment.

Wall's '*unstaged documentary pictures*' have their roots in '*straight photography*', a term that refers to a style of photography first mentioned by Charles H. Carvin as a counter-movement to the Pictorialism of the time.<sup>335</sup> Straight photographers were determined not to model their images on paintings in terms of subject matter, style and pictorial effect. They were interested in pure photography, which formally developed its own aesthetic and subject matters. The concept of straight prints caused a debate between adherents of pictorial and straight photography. In 1907, the French photographer Robert Demachy wrote an essay about the straight print in which he expressed the view that one should be in favour of photographic images which emulate the appearance of painting. Demachy preferred manual interference in the chemical

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Wall n.d.b.

<sup>335</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 11, 184.

process, extensive re-touching and Gum Bichromat prints, hoping that these aspects would legitimate photographs as artworks. He took the view that a pure and straight photograph produced without major human interference in the darkroom might be a '*nice photograph*' but could never be '*artwork*', given that '*real artwork*' needed '*the interference of a living and thinking artist*'.<sup>336</sup> Demachy believed that his opponents, particularly Frederick Evans and George Bernard Shaw, were promoting '*the mechanical qualities of photography*' and advertising them as '*a process of artistic means*'.<sup>337</sup> As it developed in the 1910s, straight photography was characterized by attention to detail, a certain sharpness of the objects and a realistic depiction of light and shade. With regard to content, the images often documented unspectacular everyday life and subject matters which sometimes referred to social issues in the tradition of the photographer Lewis Wickes Hine.<sup>338</sup> Such straight images not only had true mimetic character, they also represented the spiritual feeling of the artist. In an attempt to produce a photograph that definitely looked like one, and had no similarity to painting whatsoever, their main focus was to try to show the relationship which the depicted subject matter had with its environment in a clear, simple and objective composition.<sup>339</sup>

Alfred Stieglitz, together with Alvin Langdon Coburn and Edward Steichen, founded the Photo-Secession group. As a '*major spokesperson for Pictorial Photography*',<sup>340</sup> he was much in favour of Pictorialism which is evidenced by his earlier photographs, in particular those about the modern metropolis containing the influence of Impressionism. Later, he began to distance himself in his work from Pictorialism, and from painting more generally, in order to create greater artistic independence for the field of photography. Stieglitz, who also published the magazine '*Camera Work*', originally to promote the work of the Photo-Secession group, dedicated the last issue in 1917 to the works of Paul Strand, thus offering a well-known platform to straight photography which recognized that Strand's photographs had introduced new stylistic elements into the medium. Strand was more interested than Stieglitz in the abstract and formal character of photography, but he also documented social issues in his city photographs. His photograph '*Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*' (1916) is exemplary as '*straight photography*', depicting the shadow of the wooden railing of a

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<sup>336</sup> Demachy 2006, 238, 239.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>338</sup> Mißelbeck (ed.) 1996, 254-259; Koenig 1998.

<sup>339</sup> Michalski 2003, 181.

<sup>340</sup> Bunell 1998.

veranda on the surface of a round white table. With this new form of realism, Strand tried to establish a clear and objective aesthetic which, in his opinion, could be produced only through the photographic medium.

Wall's images of urban landscapes and suburban surroundings, like *'Steve's Farm, Steveston'* (1980),<sup>341</sup> *'Still Creek, Vancouver, Winter 2003'* (2003),<sup>342</sup> and *'Concrete Ball'* (2002),<sup>343</sup> reflect the approach of straight photography and its documentary character in the manner of Strand. Wall once commented about his suburban landscapes: *'I was trying to preserve a relationship with "straight photography" by putting my urban landscapes – cityscapes – in a pure photographic tradition [...] [Then] I saw those landscapes in a different light. They took on a new significance ... I realized that I could advance my work in various ways; one of those ways was to consider urban landscapes as foundations on which I could build something. So that's when documentary photography came in, and mixed progressively with what I was up to.'*<sup>344</sup>

During the 1970s it was time, in Wall's opinion, to work against the aesthetically constricted concept of *'art photography'* and to allow the cinema, the history of painting and other media to influence a new form of photography, as he remarked in an interview: *'I tried to work against "art photography" by means of the energy flowing from these other practices. It seemed necessary to work against the concept of "art photography", and in doing so to bring pictorial qualities, subject matter, and techniques, that were excluded by that concept. It was then that I began thinking of my works as "cinematography".'*<sup>345</sup> Cinematographic images depict staged scenes with often complicated production processes; their origins can be either Wall's own witness accounts or the complex transformation of motifs based in literature, painting or film, later shot on a set or on the street, sometimes with actors or collaborators. Wall's main concern is to ensure that his creations look authentic and plausible, often by using techniques of the film industry and/or digital manipulation.

The pigeon-holing of Wall's work into the category of *'staged photography'* could be said to be mainly due to the production process itself. The movement, which developed in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s, encompasses a variety of artists using different approaches: some place themselves centre stage in their work, like Cindy

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<sup>341</sup> *Steves Farm, Steveston*, 1980, 58x228.9 cm. Fig. 7 in: Wagstaff 2005b, 11.

<sup>342</sup> *'Still Creek, Vancouver, Winter 2003'* (2003), 202.5x259.4 cm. Plate 27 in *ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> *'Concrete Ball'* (2003), 204x260 cm. Plate 24 in *ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>345</sup> Chevrier 2001, 173.

Sherman; some work on photo sculptures and installations, like the artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss; others use images, text or other visual phenomena, like Victor Burgin. The German curator Michael Köhler describes 'staged photography' as follows: *'The representatives of staged and constructed photography invent their motifs, combine what is real and unreal, photography and painting, photography and stage design, amalgamate historical and mythological references into their images and are not afraid of manipulating reality. In doing so, they do not proceed in a destructive manner, but in an investigative and analytical fashion. The question they pose is not what reality is, but what possible realities one can create.'*<sup>346</sup>

Wall offers the spectator a complex world of imageries which are not easily decoded. Often his images appear for example like 'documentary' or 'street photography' but are actually painstakingly staged and/or digitally manipulated. His interest in 'street photography' made him realize that a photograph taken on the street in that 'decisive moment' can turn out to be, more or less by random chance, a fine image, but for Wall to leave the composition to chance made simple 'street photography' 'aesthetically limited'<sup>347</sup> and, according to Craig Burnett, it led Wall to the invention of his 'cinematographic mode of photography, in which he can recreate something he has witnessed with the look and feel of documentary photography, but as a fiction, using the techniques of a filmmaker.'<sup>348</sup>

Wall's decision to use the term 'cinematography' for these works instead of 'staged' was mainly due to the fact that he began to collaborate with people in a similar way to a filmmaker, as he explained: *'I didn't use the term cinematography right off the bat. I began to use it a little later, when I realized that it kind of defined how I was collaborating with people and how I was setting in motion preliminary preparations to make a photograph. And it struck me at some point; I realized that of course, I'd learned a lot of this from reflection on what happened in filmmaking.'*<sup>349</sup> For Wall cinematography was 'just a branch of photography', and he went on: *'Therefore, all the qualities that you can find in filmmaking are available to the photographer. I just boil*

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<sup>346</sup> Köhler (ed.) 1989, 8 (translated by the author): *'Die Vertreter der inszenierten und konstruierten Fotografie erfinden ihre Motive, verbinden frei Reales und Erfundenes, Fotografie und Malerei, Fotografie und Bühnenkunst, flechten in ihre Bilder geschichtliche und mythologische Anspielungen ein und schrecken vor Manipulationen der Wirklichkeit nicht zurück. Sie verfahren dabei jedoch nicht zerstörerisch, vielmehr prüfend und analytisch. Die Frage ist nicht, wie die Realität sei, sondern welche Modi ihr zur Verfügung stehen.'*

<sup>347</sup> Burnett 2005a, 20.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Wall n.d.a.



*them down to preparation which means simply doing things in advance of taking the picture.*<sup>350</sup>

His preparation can consist of a variety of procedures, which will be described below in more detail and in regard to selected photographs. More generally his decisions include whether to employ professional actors or amateurs, whether to build a stage set, to shoot on the street or in his studio, and whether to digitally manipulate, use digital montage or to work in analogue. When Wall was asked how he actually starts off with a shoot, he simply replied: *'I begin by not photographing.'*<sup>351</sup> His 'cinematographic' or 'near-documentary' photographs often have their origins in something Wall actually witnessed and then later created out of his memories, as he explains for one of his works: *"Tattoos and Shadows" [2000] came from something I saw right near my house. It was a summer afternoon, walking along; I don't know where I was going. Next street over, three or four young people, covered with tattoos, sitting under a tree, with light flickering through the leaves, just like you see in the picture. There's just something really beautiful about that combination of the fixed inking, you know, of the skin, that's never gonna go away. And then this other pattern. These two patterns laid on these people's arms and it was just so photographic, such a beautiful subject.*<sup>352</sup> The following summer Wall began his work: he found three people who met his requirements, and looked for a photogenic tree and the right location.<sup>353</sup>

Wall forms his pictorial idea before the actual work begins, like a film director who scripts a narrative after doing his research thematically and in respect of technical aspects concerning the production process. The only problem he faces, being a photographer, is that he cannot build up or explain the plot he depicts, given that everything needs to be presented in one shoot only, in a way a presentation of *'the decisive moment'*. However, in Wall's opinion, a photograph does not need Henri Cartier-Bresson's *'decisive moment'*, *'nor does it have to be a document of an existing place or thing.'*<sup>354</sup> It might be true that there is no necessity for a photograph to fulfil documentary aspects or claims to depict reality, but it is arguable whether this applies to *'the decisive moment'* as well. Wall's cinematographic approach could dismiss this intuitive or decisive moment altogether; for his work it is not relevant any more, given that Wall believes he can recreate this moment when, where, and as it suits him.

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Burnett 2005a, 10.

However, Wall's images also to a certain extent live by their credibility or authenticity, i.e. that the pictured location maybe exists somewhere and that the pictured plot may have occurred at some point. One could therefore argue that Wall attempts to construct '*the decisive moment*' in an often time-consuming narrative fashion with actors, detailed sets, a production crew and the digital revision of the image.

Through his process of invention and construction and at great expense, Wall often creates dramatic and narrative subject matters, sometimes of social relevance, like for example his first cinematographic photograph '*Mimic*' (1982) (Plate 24), which captures the '*decisive moment*' of a brief encounter between three people in a precise, detailed shoot. The arrangement and setting of the scene are reminiscent of a film still, combined with the documentary style of street photography. The image shows a Caucasian couple walking hand in hand along a pavement on an industrial estate. The Caucasian man, bearded and unkempt, wears a denim sleeveless jacket and an orange t-shirt; his girlfriend is dressed in red shorts, a short white top and an egg-shell white cardigan. On the right, next to the couple, walks a far-east Asian man dressed in a light grey shirt and grey trousers, looking better dressed than the couple. The photograph depicts the moment when the couple is about to overtake the Asian man; the Caucasian man stretches his skin around the eye with the fingers of his right hand in an attempt to make a stereotypical mockery of the Asian man's eyes, who is looking vaguely in his direction. Neither the Asian man nor the Caucasian couple seem to be aware of the camera and its position, which helps to create the feeling for the spectator that s/he is the only person observing the whole scene who consequently sees more than the persons involved. This sort of camera work is also used in classic illustrative narrative cinema and is here combined with elements of documentary photography, therefore leaving the viewer with the feeling that he observes a real scene. This depiction of a racist and abusive scene was intended to portray a '*generalized social issue*'.<sup>355</sup> Wall was particularly interested in the gesture of the Caucasian man, as he stated in an interview with Burnett: '*The gesture was so small. I was interested in the mimesis, the physical mimesis. The white man was copying the Asian's body. Mimesis is one of the original gestures of art.*'<sup>356</sup>

The Greek word '*mimesis*' translates as imitation or representation; it refers to representational aspects of reality and, in particular, to aspects of human life and its representation in art and literature; it has had the status of a highly critical principle of

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<sup>355</sup> Burnett 2005a, 20.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 21.

art philosophical discourse since classical antiquity.<sup>357</sup> The German philologist Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) characterized mimesis in his book '*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*' as an interpretation of reality through literary representation.<sup>358</sup> In one chapter, he compares Homer's world view with the narrations of the bible. For Auerbach, the way we see and represent reality is connected to our social and intellectual understanding. In his view, the literature of different periods characterizes the social conventions and issues of the time in which they are written.

Auerbach's concept of social and cultural contextualization can be applied to Wall's image '*Mimic*', which mirrors a specific social and political problem of the 1980s in North American society. Given the political and social circumstances in the United States in the 1970s, which included the consequences of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the energy crisis and threats to the American economy posed by high unemployment and inflation, immigrants had a problematic standing in American society. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed unprecedented numbers of immigrants from Mexico, Latin America and especially Asia into the United States. Until the mid-1980s substantial population growth caused social problems and hostility towards migrants in poorer suburbs.<sup>359</sup>

One can therefore argue that Auerbach's idea – the person who observes reality and then represents it through literature reflects his own social and intellectual understanding of the subject – is exemplified in Wall's photograph '*Mimic*', in his case through pictorial art. For Wall, the image was not primarily about the content of a racist scene or its social relevance; it was also about the concept of '*mimesis*' in a theoretical and practical sense. The image depicts the mimesis i.e. the imitation of the Asian eyes by the passing Caucasian man, and also the mimesis of the settings, with the building on the right-hand side mirrored in the glass windows of the building on the left. And for Wall the concept of '*mimesis*' applies even in a wider sense to his work, as he points out: '*I have always considered my work to be a mimesis of the effects of cinema and of painting and so the fictional, formal and poetic part of it has always been very important*'.<sup>360</sup> As a consequence, his pictures can refer to known composition techniques of the pictorial arts or history of film and can sometimes be based on literature, like '*After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*' (1999-2000) (Plate

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<sup>357</sup> Seebold (ed.) 1999; Ziegler/Sontheimer (eds.) 1979, Vol. 3, 1307.

<sup>358</sup> Auerbach 2003.

<sup>359</sup> International Information Programs of the United States of America n.d.

<sup>360</sup> Wagstaff 2005b, 12.

25) or modelled on paintings, like *'Picture for Women'* (1979) or *'The Destroyed Room'* (1978).

#### **4. The Photographic Author: Literary and Pictorial Models**

Some of Wall's works interweave what would be an otherwise contradictory mixture of straight and staged photography. His cinematographic images are sometimes based on his meticulous research and observation in order to find and document his objects in a realistic way, using documentary images as models to construct and stage, sometimes at great cost, the sets for his chosen subject matters. When Wall started work on *'After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue'* (1999-2000), inspired by Ralph Ellison's novel of 1952, he first travelled to Harlem to take pictures of several cellars. Although the finished photograph depicts a fictitious scene, Wall wanted to ensure that the set he built in his Vancouver studio would not lack in authenticity.<sup>361</sup> It is this combination of a documentary character in a constructed setting which ensures authenticity and makes the spectator believe, at least at first sight, in the existence of the subject matter, and invites the viewer to decode the image.

Ellison's novel tells the story of an unnamed African-American man who, during a street riot in Harlem, New York City, in the 1940s, falls into the cellar of an apartment building and decides to stay and live underground. In Ellison's prologue, the man introduces himself to the reader and describes his circumstances, anxieties and the reason for being invisible: *'because people refuse to see me'*.<sup>362</sup> The people who surround him do not accept his reality, his race, his social status and in that sense they do not see him. His revenge on society for not being seen, for not being recognized, is to steal electricity from a power company through his illegally wired ceiling with the 1,369 light bulbs that illuminate his cellar.<sup>363</sup> The man then explains why he is in desperate need of light: *'Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality and gives birth to my form.'*<sup>364</sup> Later he declares: *'Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well.'*<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Burnett 2005a, 95.

<sup>362</sup> Ellison 2001, 3.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 7.

Wall's image depicts the unnamed African-American from behind. The recipient can see only his profile. He does not make eye contact with the viewer. He seems to be cleaning something which he holds in his hands. In Ellison's prologue his character is not seeking a dialogue with the reader or another character. The invisible man talks about his situation in which the reader participates. In the whole novel, from the prologue to the end of the book, as John Callahan points out, the man is '*out of touch*' with the world: '*Only in the epilogue, having made an ironic, conditional peace with who he is and his humanity, is he ready for response, for conversation [...]. In the epilogue, Invisible Man emerges as a writer. And the visibility on the page of his just completed narrative hastens his decision to re-enter the world.*'<sup>366</sup> Wall's image depicts the prologue; it shows the man in a non-communicative posture, maybe thinking, maybe talking to himself, but not seeking contact with the viewer. As in the novel, one is a silent witness to a scene which slowly unfolds in front of one: the numerous light bulbs, the dishes in an improvised sink, buckets and old carpets, a record-player and other countless other bits and pieces in the confined claustrophobic space of a cellar. In a way it seems unavoidable to compare Ellison's character with Wall. He is not seeking a dialogue either, until he finishes his work, which then is in desperate need of light to gain its visibility, shape and form. Wall offers the spectator a whole range of layers to be read in this image: a literary foundation as a model, a philosophical comparison with his own work, and a reminiscence of documentary photography in a staged scene.

Another approach by Wall is to model his images with reference to paintings. In his opinion, '*a photographer who wishes to achieve the highest mark must confront the painter who had set it.*'<sup>367</sup> In 1979, Wall made '*Picture for Women*' (Plate 26) and described it as '*a remake*' of Manet's masterpiece '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882) (Plate 27) '*in the same way as a movie might be a remake of an older one – an update that uses new technology and a slightly inflected take of a theme*', in Burnett's words.<sup>368</sup> In his '*remake*' Wall referred the structure and composition of his image to Manet's painting, which he had seen at the Courtauld Collection.<sup>369</sup> He also highlights the relationship between himself, as the male artist, and his female model, whilst leaving enough space for reflection and speculation about the women's movement and the general role of women in society in the late 1970s.

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<sup>366</sup> Callahan 2001.

<sup>367</sup> Galassi 2003, 31.

<sup>368</sup> Burnett 2005a, 13.

<sup>369</sup> Barents 2007, 187-188.

Photography and painting have always influenced each other; for example, at the turn of the century Pictorialism emulated painting and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Futurism emulated photography.<sup>370</sup> The dynamic relationship between photography and painting also helped to create Photo-Realism in the late 1960s, in which movement one can locate, among others, Gerhard Richter.<sup>371</sup> Richter's practice of painting onto enlarged photographs or of modelling his paintings precisely on photographs was, on the one hand, to question the apparent objectivity of the photographs in order to present their content from a different viewpoint, and, on the other, to create, like Wall, a new form, i.e. an update of a depictive medium.

When Richter painted his cycle of fifteen paintings titled '*18<sup>th</sup> October 1977*' (1988),<sup>372</sup> he used film stills and press and police photographs. The series depicts four members of the German terrorist organization, the Red Army Faction (RAF), and the title refers to the date when three RAF members were found dead in their prison cells. The circumstances of their death caused a major controversy, as well as suspicion and debate among the general public in Germany, particularly about the general handling of the case by the government. Although Richter did not identify himself with the political ideals of the RAF as a terrorist organization, he was certainly taken by some of the utopian and unrealistic idealism of individual members. For the first exhibition of the RAF cycle in 1989, Richter wrote some notes for a press briefing: '*The death of the terrorists and every occurrence that related to it before and since characterizes an atrocity that affected me and which, even when I tried to push it away, concerned me like something that I had not brought to a close.*'<sup>373</sup> In Germany Richter's intentions with this series of contemporary images were occasionally interpreted as political; but in addition he was particularly interested in updating the traditional genre of history painting. This genre has, in a way, lost its credentials as a messenger of historic events: in today's world such events are transmitted by film, television and newspaper

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<sup>370</sup> The imitation of Impressionism in photographic images resulted around the 1900s in the movement of Pictorialism, a trend which copied the light effects, composition and blurred character of painting. Painters of Italian Futurism, on the other hand, used photographic images as models for their paintings. They were inspired by works of Jules-Etienne Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, leading them to paint humans and animals in motion: Billeter (ed.) 1979.

<sup>371</sup> Sager 1973.

<sup>372</sup> A selection of the series can be found in: Elderfield (ed.) 2004, 248-259.

<sup>373</sup> Obrist (ed.) 1994: '*Der Tod der Terroristen und alle damit in Zusammenhang stehenden Geschehnisse davor und danach bezeichnen eine Ungeheuerlichkeit, die mich betraff und mich, auch wenn ich sie verdrängte, seitdem beschäftigte, wie etwas, was ich nicht erledigt hatte.*' Translated by the author.

images which shape our understanding and memories of events and the past.<sup>374</sup> Although their intentions might differ, it could be said that for Wall it is the photographic image that updates the Impressionistic painting, while for Richter it is the genre of the historic painting that updates the photograph. With their work, both artists examine aspects of Realism and issues around Pictorialism; additionally their works have to be seen in an art-historical and cultural context in order for the depicted subject matter to be understood. Issues concerning the composition are different: Richter often paints blurred versions of the original subject matter, whereas Wall transfers the basic structure of the painting into his photograph; for example modelling his photograph 'Picture for Women' (1979) on Manet's 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère' (1882).

Manet's depiction of the most famous Parisian *salle de variétés*, made just a year before he died, can be seen as a result of his interest in people's everyday life and in urban leisure. The painting depicts a barmaid at the Folies-Bergère, known not only for its shows, music and circus entertainments but also for its prostitutes. By depicting so prominently and *en face* one of the barmaids, supposedly also a prostitute, Manet broke a taboo. He introduced the exploitation of women into the realm of high art and allowed this subject matter to take centre stage in the Parisian *Salon*. Even though such a moral subject provoked controversy, the critics mainly focused on a different matter, as Timothy Clark points out: the factually incorrect depiction of the reflection and perspective in the mirror.<sup>375</sup> The barmaid looks directly at the spectator and her back is seen in the reflection of the mirror behind her. Next to her reflection in the mirror is the face of a man, her potential customer; visitors to the bar can also be seen in the distant background. The painting is essentially split in two zones: the foreground is dominated by the depiction of the barmaid; the background is defined by the reflection in the mirror, offering a sense of depth to the bar and depicting the barmaid's back and her male guest's face as well as the visitors, the dangling legs of an acrobat hanging from the ceiling to the left and the bar's light fittings. Manet could have painted the scene from a viewpoint located directly opposite the barmaid; however, this is contradicted by the reflection of the depicted figures and the space that the bar occupies, an inconsistency that attracted the attention of the critics. Jules Comte writing in *L'Illustration*, for example, asked: '*But what strikes us first of all is that this famous mirror, indispensable to an understanding of all these reflections and perspectives, does not exist: did Monsieur Manet not know how to do it, or did he find*

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<sup>374</sup> Elderfield (ed.) 2004, 344.

<sup>375</sup> Clark 1984, 239-244.

an impression of it to be enough?<sup>376</sup> Timothy James Clark furthermore remarked: *‘Jules Comte’s criticisms were often repeated in 1882. The woman in Manet’s picture was held to be badly drawn and insubstantial; the light was “indecisive”, “bluish and murky”, the glass and reflection were hopelessly botched. Sometimes the critics were almost kind to this last imperfection, or at least untroubled by it – it was something in the picture that they could test out verbally and declare to be simply, factually wrong.’*<sup>377</sup> Still, the painting raises the question as to why the back of the man who is reflected in the mirror next to the barmaid is not visible in front of her. Jonathan Miller has argued that, given the nearly invisible frame of the mirror and the strange reflections of objects and figures which do not add up at all, *‘and since the young lady seen from the rear is in the wrong position to be the reflection of the barmaid who is facing us, we cannot be sure that this is, as commonly supposed, a large mirror.’*<sup>378</sup> However, if we assume this is just *‘a large mirror’*, could it be that the spectator is the missing man? Regardless of who the actual spectator is, it is only by looking at and standing in front of the barmaid that we become someone willing to pay the young woman for her services. The reflection of the man shows someone who is not where he should be, where we would expect him to be, given that the mirror, with its flat reflective surface, must reverse what is in front of it, and Manet’s mirror does exactly that: it shows the man’s reflected face, so we are led to the assumption that he must exist. In fact, according to the laws of reflection we expect to see his back in front of the barmaid, but still he is out of sight. Does being out of sight mean he stands on the same level as do we – the spectators? Is he amongst us or are we him? Manet has got us caught up in an illusion and in a way forces us to question the act of looking at ourselves.

Wall had seen Manet’s *‘Bar at the Folies-Bergère’* (1882) repeatedly while studying at the Courtauld Gallery and was fascinated by the painting, as he remarked: *‘I wanted to comment on it, to analyse it in a new picture, to try to draw out of its inner structure, that famous positioning of figures, male and female, in an everyday working situation [...]. I made my picture as a theoretical diagram in an empty classroom.’*<sup>379</sup> Wall’s image is very much a graphic representation of Manet’s painting, depicting a woman *en face*, standing in an empty classroom.<sup>380</sup> The man, Wall himself, and his female model are reflected in a mirror; between them stands Wall’s view camera on a tripod. The

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<sup>376</sup> Quotation and translation after *ibid.*, 240.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup> Miller 1998, 129.

<sup>379</sup> Barents 2007, 187-188.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



background in Wall's image shows a row of windows, several chairs and a desk. The light fittings, single bulbs hanging from the ceiling, create a sense of the depth of the classroom. The basic structure of Manet's image thus recurs: a man (Wall) and a woman (his model) are reflected in a mirror like the barmaid and her client in Manet's image. Unlike Manet, who uses the visitors to the bar reflected behind the woman in the mirror as an audience, Wall uses his camera as a third figure to oversee the whole scene. But there is also an important difference from Manet's image: the mirror is not in front of us any more; we are behind the mirror watching the scene. Miller once remarked: *'How convenient it would be if mirrors could retain the image of what they reflect. Portraits could be done just by sitting in front of a looking glass. But this is an absurd fantasy.'*<sup>381</sup> The mirror can of course not retain the reflection, but the camera in front of it can and, given its position, it at least leaves the impression that the mirror has retained what was before it.

Wall's idea of modelling his photographs on paintings evolved from his wish to do *'historically and theoretically informed productions'*.<sup>382</sup> So he transferred the basic structure of Manet's pictorial idea into his photograph *'Picture for Women'* (1979) similarly to how he modelled a year earlier his first lightbox *'The Destroyed Room'* (1978) on Delacroix's *'The Death of Sardanapalus'* (1827-28). In this way, Wall's compositions take their patterns – that is the overall depicted theme – from Manet's and Delacroix's iconography, in Delacroix's case an allegory of violence and brutal destruction and in Manet's an allegory of Parisian everyday life which also offers, after the first visual reading, a metaphor to a more theoretical level concerned with the representation of reality and its illusion through the inclusion of a mirror. Manet's and Delacroix's chosen perspectives are also reflected in Wall's images, in Delacroix's case a diagonal arrangement and in Manet's the *en face* presentation. Moreover, Wall's idea of creating a remake of a painting with the help of new technology, i.e. photography, did not stop with the composition, the iconography or his conceptual ambitions; the transformative process also involves technical aspects and relationships. In his attempt to create a photographic remake of Manet's image, Wall printed *'Picture for Women'* (1979) on two pieces of film and joined them together. The join runs vertically through the lens of the depicted camera. Wall explained his decision for this process: *'I wanted to create a structure based on the mechanisms used to make the picture: camera,*

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<sup>381</sup> Miller 1998, 183.

<sup>382</sup> Barents 2007, 186. Making art historical and theoretical references are according to Stallabrass also *'one of the most reliable tactics to get work discussed as if it is art'*. Stallabrass 2010, 116.

*mirror, model, Manet's painting.*<sup>383</sup> Another technical aspect, in regard to the subject matter, is the connection between the depicted view camera and the panoramic mirror, in that both fulfil the physical task of reflecting what is in front of them. This becomes possible in the case of the mirror through its glass surface that is coated with a reflective silver layer. The reflection of the mirror is obviously not permanent, but, as Miller points out, if the surface of the mirror were '*chemically treated [it] would accurately retain the reflected image*'.<sup>384</sup> Here Miller refers to the earliest photographic process, the Daguerreotype, which laterally reversed its images as does a mirror so, in order to correct the reversed image, '*an actual mirror was placed at the angle in front of the lens when the exposure was made and the reflection of the subject was then photographed*' and transferred onto a light-sensitive silver iodide surface.<sup>385</sup> Wall has interpreted Baudelaire's "*Painting of Modern Life*" as *an attitude of looking, reflecting and making*;<sup>386</sup> his photographic update reflects this approach and draws attention to Manet's painting. Wall's photographic remake reflects Manet's painting in terms of iconography and composition as well as focusing on the practical side of the photographic process and its key elements and technical aspects.

In his approach Wall also refers indirectly to Impressionism, which itself updated traditional subject matters, such as the depiction of '*Olympia*' (1863) by Manet. At the time, the use of such a classical iconography in a contemporary depiction and in a modern style was rejected by the public and the official *Salon*.<sup>387</sup> More generally, the Impressionists tried to offer new viewpoints of their subject matter, which were often concerned with everyday life. By working *en plein air* and by painting directly onto the canvas, artists shaped the particular style of Impressionism with its distinct and vivid colour scheme. This approach was seen as a breach with generally accepted artistic principles, i.e. doing sketches or drawings before painting in the studio and sticking to a rather confined classical iconography. Wall's '*Picture for Women*' (1979) refers to an already existent subject matter, updated through the use of a contemporary depictive technique, i.e. photography, and through a new arrangement of the key elements by

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<sup>383</sup> Wagstaff 2005b, 10.

<sup>384</sup> Miller 1998, 183.

<sup>385</sup> Baldwin 1991, 35.

<sup>386</sup> Shapiro 2007.

<sup>387</sup> Manet's '*Olympia*' (1863), Musée d'Orsay, referred mainly to the following depictions of Venus: Giorgione or Giorgio da Castelfranco (1477-1510), '*Sleeping Venus*' (1510), Gemäldegalerie Alter Meister, Dresden; Titian or Tiziano Vecellio (1477 or 1488-1576), '*Venus of Urbino*' (1538), Uffizi, Florence; Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828), '*The Nude Maja*' (about 1797), Prado, Madrid. All three paintings depict a nude woman in a similar posture.

keeping the overall theoretical aspects of mirroring surfaces in mind and taking it even a step further than did Manet, as we have seen.

Wall's photographic remake interprets Manet's '*Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882), itself seen by art historians as an Impressionistic interpretation of Diego Velázquez's '*Las Meninas*' (1656) (Plate 28). Manet was a great admirer of Velázquez, as he once confessed in a letter to Baudelaire, and seems to have been fascinated by the idea of including the spectator in the scene by playing with the pictorial space and the viewpoint of the recipient and thereby creating a different relationship between viewer and painting.<sup>388</sup> In his painting '*Olympia*' (1863) the goddess, depicted nude, looks *en face* into the eye of the spectator; to her left her maid, also looking in the direction of the viewer, approaches with a bouquet. Their gaze out of the painting and the presentation of the flowers automatically makes the spectator a visitor to Olympia, who was in fact a well-known Parisian prostitute. Manet realized a similar idea in his painting '*The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*' (1867), where the spectator becomes a witness to the execution through the shadow on the ground in front of the soldier on the right.<sup>389</sup>

Velázquez's '*Las Meninas*' (1656), Manet's '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882) and Wall's '*Picture for Women*' (1979) are all concerned with illusion and reality: an important component in these images is the mirror, which creates another layer of reality through its reflection. The depiction of mirrors has a long art-historical tradition; it is possible to draw a developmental line from van Eyck's '*The Arnolfini Portrait*' (1434) to Velázquez's '*Las Meninas*' (1656) to Manet's '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882). Van Eyck's painting might be a model for Velázquez.<sup>390</sup> In his Arnolfini portrait, he presents, typical for the time, a mirror with a convex surface on the back wall. The reflection depicts the back of the married couple as well as the possible guest – maybe the painter himself. Their position in the room is identical with that of the observer, who becomes part of the composition. Whereas in Dutch paintings the mirror traditionally

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<sup>388</sup> Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660), '*Las Meninas*' (The Maids of Honour) (1656), Prado, Madrid, Spain. In 1865, Manet saw, and expressed admiration for, Velázquez's work in Madrid. He wrote to Baudelaire on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1865 to the effect that in his view Velázquez was the most influential painter ever: Reed 2003. On the connection between Manet and Velázquez see also Brombert 1997.

<sup>389</sup> For a fragmented version of Manet's '*The Execution of Maximilian*', later purchased and reassembled by Edgar Degas: National Gallery n.d; for a re-creation of Manet's '*The Execution of Maximilian*': Impressionist Art Gallery n.d.

<sup>390</sup> Stoichita 2001.

reflects '*the original content of the picture*',<sup>391</sup> Velázquez uses the depiction of the mirror in '*Las Meninas*' and the content of its reflection in an even more complex fashion. Here the mirror reflects King Philip IV and Queen Maria Anna of Spain, but neither is present in the depicted room. Again, they claim the same position as the spectator, which explains their *en face* reflection in the mirror on the back wall. Velázquez himself claims the most prominent position in the image. He appears to be painting; and he is looking at the observer, i.e. at his original subject matter, the queen and king. His own depiction in a full-length self-portrait, like the Infanta Margarita, who is also depicted *en face* and standing in a full-length portrait, underlines his social status as an artist at the Spanish court. Through Velázquez's depiction '*We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter*', as the French sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault puts it.<sup>392</sup> In Foucault's view, '*The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene.*'<sup>393</sup>

Van Eyck's and Manet's, and also Velázquez's, paintings have given rise to a debate about the actual content and proper perspective of the reflection in the mirror, and the relation and interaction the viewer has with the depicted and reflected figures. In Wall's picture, the viewer observes the scene from the viewpoint of the mirror, which is obviously an impossible viewpoint in reality, unless we are looking through a one-way mirror, as used for example in an interrogation room. But if this is not the case, the contradiction would be that the viewer cannot claim his natural place on the opposite side of the mirror in the image, because s/he is just the observer of a full-length *en-face* reflection depicted in an overall view. Unlike in van Eyck's, Manet's and Velázquez's images, in which the spectator can find his imaginary place, in Wall's image the spectator seems to be behind the reflective surface of the mirror, looking onto a scene that presents itself unaware of an observer behind the mirror on the other side; or maybe we are observed by Wall and his model while we are observing them, as in Foucault's suggestions about Velázquez's painting. It is this play with different layers of reality and illusion, the perception of the recipient and the oscillation of the spectator's mind between his space and the pictorial space, which connects these images with one another.

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<sup>391</sup> Foucault 2002, 8. Foucault examines and describes Velázquez's '*Las Meninas*' in detail.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 15.

## **5. Digital Compositions: The Photographic Hieroglyph**

Photography – drawing (*graphein*) with light (*phos*) – refers by definition to a technical process including all the physical, optical, and chemical procedures the recording of images involves; therefore it has depended on technological developments since its invention. The most recent changes, resulting from digital technology, have also changed the nature of the photographic medium from a documentary tool to a creative tool, influencing the production process, the appearance of the studio as a workplace and the perception of digital composition.

When Wall started in the early 1980s to experiment on his computer with the first image processing software, the user-friendly digital technology which we know today was still in its infancy. There were of course early attempts to include computer technology into the art; for example Richard Hamilton, David Hockney and Sidney Nolan tried to make use of new technologies when working with the Quantel Paintbox, a predecessor of the Adobe Photoshop program. Paintbox, a graphics workstation, was designed for the composition of videos and graphics. In 1986, Hamilton and Hockney participated in a BBC 2 programme to create artworks with Paintbox. The software allowed the artists to draw directly onto the monitor, a similar approach to drawing on a PET (polyethylene terephthalate) film for prints. The created works became part of a BBC series called *'Painting with Light'*. However, in the 1980s, Paintbox was an exception; technological developments had yet to make significant progress before artists could work with computers in a fully flexible and user-friendly way, as Burnett notes: *'the resolution was too low and the computers were achingly slow.'*<sup>394</sup>

But at the beginning of the 1990s, with the invention of the microchip, the so-called *'digital revolution'* began. The foundations for the digital developments which took place so rapidly had already been laid in 1941 by the German engineer Konrad Zuse, claimed to have invented the first commercial digital computer.<sup>395</sup> Since then, computer hardware has shrunk to manageable sizes and software become more affordable and useable. Now personal computers were powerful tools on which to run a variety of word-processing and image-creation programs like Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, Quark Xpress and Adobe Photoshop. It was now possible to design pictorial compositions from scratch and to revise and manipulate them in detail. The way an

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<sup>394</sup> Burnett 2005a, 49.

<sup>395</sup> Konrad Zuse Internet Archive n.d.

image could now be produced was comparable to the work process of a painter. Subject matters could be planned, sketched, composed and revised directly on the screen. This was more controllable, yet at the same time a slower work process than one would expect. In the 1990s, Wall returned to digital techniques and remarked in an interview: *'When I began working on the computer, I realised you don't have to do it all at once. Of course it's exciting trying to get everything in one shot, but working digitally slowed things down. It made the process more complicated and, I hope, deeper.'*<sup>396</sup> Wall's opinion is shared by Gursky, who also started in the 1990s to work digitally and realized that his actual work process at the computer had become painstakingly slow. Gursky mentioned to the curator Veit Görner that he *'laboriously created an all-over [composition] using digital processing techniques'*<sup>397</sup> for his sports shoe image *'Untitled V'* (1997). Just to reiterate, Gursky not only built the shelf for his shoe picture in New York, he also took several photographs and restocked the shelf with new shoes for every picture. The actual image digitally amalgamates six negatives.<sup>398</sup> In this sense, the issue of time consumption is mainly down to control and the countless possible options which these programs offer, as Gursky points out: *'When I work like this, I keep the picture in my mind's eye and approach the final result step by step without allowing myself to be influenced by spontaneous flashes of inspiration.'*<sup>399</sup> Digital techniques and in particular the option to work and revise images digitally and directly at the computer screen allows the photographer to control his progress completely; the moment of surprise after developing an image in the darkroom is now gone. The use of computers has thus brought the work process of these artists closer to the process of making paintings. Wall once admitted: *'I have always envied the way a painter can work on his picture a little bit at a time, always keeping the totality in mind by stepping back from his work for a glance at it. A painting is never the rendering of a moment in time, but an accumulation of actions which simulates a moment or creates the illusion of an event occurring before our eyes. By opening up the photographic moment the computer begins to blur the boundaries between the forms and creates a new threshold zone which interests me greatly.'*<sup>400</sup>

The use of computers has not only changed the work process for these photographers; it has also changed their workplaces, as explained in regard to

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<sup>396</sup> Denes 2005.

<sup>397</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>398</sup> See also Chapter II.

<sup>399</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 8.

<sup>400</sup> Wagstaff 2005b, 15.

Gursky.<sup>401</sup> Not only do they no longer work alone in their darkrooms – they often now employ a team of technicians and assistants – but they are also in need of space for their technical equipment. Wall, unlike Gursky, was keen to produce his photographs from start to finish in his own studio. He therefore converted two townhouses in Vancouver. These are separated by an alleyway. One building houses a large traditional darkroom and space for much-needed light tables.<sup>402</sup> The second house is dedicated to his computer workstation and ‘a massive custom-made vat for developing the oversized transparencies’.<sup>403</sup> A small warehouse, a few streets away from the actual studio, is used for storage for everything else that is needed for the production of the images and for the creation of sets.<sup>404</sup>

The use of digital techniques is confined to Wall’s category of ‘*cinematographic*’ and ‘*near-documentary*’ images. However, not all is digitally invented in these images: Wall often uses actual photographs made for his digital montages and either combines the individual images or enhances them with invented elements. Digital manipulation is a convenient tool for Wall; he can expand his options to depict certain subject matters which would otherwise probably be impossible to portray and, at the same time, can maintain a certain degree of authenticity and plausibility in his more realistic-appearing images, as we will see in the following examples.

In the 1990s, Wall began to use digital techniques more frequently for his artistic works. An example is one of his earliest digital montages, ‘*A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*’ (1993) (Plate 29), part of his ‘*historically and theoretically informed productions*’,<sup>405</sup> like ‘*The Destroyed Room*’ and ‘*Picture for Women*’, and is based on the woodblock print ‘*A High Wind in Eji*’ (1831-33) (Plate 30) by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. The woodblock print depicts the decisive moment when a strong breeze struck several people who were walking on a meandering path through the fields near Mount Fuji. The landscape, the mountain and even the sky, drawn with effortless flowing lines, appear calm and tranquil. The strength of the breeze becomes apparent through the depiction of a pile of papers, belonging to the person on the far left, being blown into the air. While slightly bending their knees the person seems completely overwhelmed, with a scarf blown into their face. Behind the figure are two trees, which provide the only vertical lines in the composition. The wind buffets the

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<sup>401</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>402</sup> Wagstaff 2005a.

<sup>403</sup> Tumlrir 2001, 150.

<sup>404</sup> Wagstaff 2005a.

<sup>405</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

leaves, some whirling through the sky together with the sheets of paper. The other three figures in the foreground also try to resist the wind: they bend forward and hold firmly onto their straw hats, except for the man right in the middle who watches while the storm whirls his hat high up into the sky. Further in the background another three tiny figures are also fighting their way through the storm. Hokusai drew the landscape with effortless and simply flowing lines that appear in stark contrast to the onerous and difficult resistance the humans have to put up against nature's stormy force.

This coloured woodblock print stems from the series '*Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*' by Hokusai. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Japan began to open up its trade to the West, bringing Japanese art as well as arts and crafts products to Europe. People were interested and inspired by the colourful kimonos, the china, fine metal works and in particular by the coloured woodcut prints, which became very fashionable and also influenced Impressionist artworks. Artists like Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and Paul Gauguin, amongst others, included stylistic and compositional elements of these woodcuts into their chosen medium: painting for example the shortened perspective, simple silhouettes of figures and partially abstract elements and ornaments.<sup>406</sup>

Wall used Hokusai's woodprint as a model for '*A Sudden Gust of Wind*', which Burnett has called '*a remake of another picture in the manner of "Picture for Women"*'.<sup>407</sup> In a similar way to his treatment of Manet's masterpiece, Wall's composition takes as a template the overall structure of Hokusai's woodprint. As in Hokusai, there are four people depicted in the foreground who are battling with the breeze. The person on the left, which could be a women given the pink fingernails, also has her scarf blown into her face as her papers are whirled away by the wind and she struggles to keep hold of her folder. Behind her, exactly as in Hokusai's print, we find two thin trees, towering vertically in to the sky. The other three people also bear resemblance to Hokusai's figures; they occupy a nearly similar position in the overall composition and their slightly bent posture appears identical to Hokusai, while they too are holding onto their caps with the man in the middle looking up into the sky at his lost hat. Wall's scene is set on a cranberry farm near Vancouver with fields visible on the left side stretching as far as the horizon. Right behind the figures in the foreground one sees a canal with some electricity poles and ramshackle sheds on the right. There is nothing of Hokusai's tranquil landscape here and Wall's industrial background is more of a reference to mass fruit farming. For some reason the man who has lost his hat is

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<sup>406</sup> Walther (ed.) 1995, Vol. 2, 483-484.

<sup>407</sup> Burnett 2005a, 52.



surrounded by an aura of light and while the others are struggling with the wind, he smiles slightly and swivels elegantly around like a ballet dancer.

At first glance one might think that Wall was able to successfully capture the decisive moment when the gust of wind struck, but this is a digitally arranged decisiveness, given that the composition combines over a hundred images taken over a period of five months and a cast of actors, as well as some wind machines.<sup>408</sup> The movement in the scene is brought to a perfect standstill: nothing in the depiction has lost its sharp contour; the composition appears well balanced and seems to tell a tale about these people. What are they doing there? Why are two of them dressed formally in jacket and trousers? What sort of paperwork is that flying up there in the sky? Was it important? The image appears like a film still, with its narrative element.

Wall described his motivation to produce the image as follows: *'It sometimes strikes me that an image from the past becomes spontaneously open and possible again the moment I see it. This happened with the Hokusai print which inspired Sudden Gust of Wind.'*<sup>409</sup> But maybe it was not only the woodcut print that provoked Wall interest; he might also have been intrigued by Hokusai himself, whom one could describe as 'a Japanese painter of modern life'. Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), who died aged nearly ninety, is seen as a representative of the Ukiyo-e school, literally meaning 'the transitory world'. The Ukiyo-e or 'popular school'<sup>410</sup> was concerned with everyday life and ordinary people, in contrast to the 'academic school' of Tosa, Kanō or Kōrin, which mainly illustrated the aristocracy and their court life. The majority of the artists of the Ukiyo-e movement favoured subject matters of everyday life, for example the leisure districts of cities, the private lives of women and their children, the world of the theatre and the Japanese landscape. Hokusai, as a member of this group, mainly drew people carrying out their daily work and then focused on something characteristic in their actions, often capturing their emotions, whether it was exhaustion, happiness or pain. His depictions capture the instant of the ordinary life of normal people and they fascinate not only through their simplicity but also through a feeling of truthfulness to the depicted moment. From 1814 onwards, Hokusai published his drawings, called 'manga', in fifteen books, thirteen during his lifetime and two posthumously, like an encyclopaedia of everyday images.<sup>411</sup> The Ukiyo-e movement also invented the coloured woodprint, which could use up to fifteen printing plates. The artists were not

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<sup>408</sup> Campany (ed.) 2004, 161.

<sup>409</sup> Chevrier 2007b.

<sup>410</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 6, 57-59.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

only concerned with modern life; it was also their production process which became quite modern and industrial, with several printers and wood-cutters engaged in a project, and publishers to ensure wide dissemination of the prints.

Wall therefore might have been interested not only in Hokusai's impressions of Japanese daily life but also in his modern production process. The woodcut and print allowed artists not only to produce their work *en masse* but also to circulate it widely, something that can be said for photography as well. Yet Hokusai made '*A High Wind in Eji*' six years before the announcement of the invention of the earliest viable photographic process, the Daguerreotype, in 1839. Wall's choice to remake Hokusai's woodblock print with digital manipulation might be interpreted as a statement about the technical development of his photographic medium. Hokusai was able to capture the instant with his chosen medium at the time, whereas Wall, by producing a digital montage and combining different actions and sittings into one image, celebrates the loss of that same decisive moment which his medium had offered for so long. With digital montage Wall had countered Baudelaire's argument, that photography was not able to blend different realities and depictions into one image.

Wall's works, especially his '*cinematographic*' and '*near-documentary*' photographs, depend, to a certain degree, on the plausibility and authenticity of the depiction. With the help of digital techniques and great expenditure in his production process, he is able to keep these elements, even in the most bizarre compositions such as, for example, '*The Flooded Grave*' (1998-2000) (Plate 31). Wall explained briefly the idea behind the image: '*The "event" shown in The Flooded Grave – the "event" or the "theme", sometimes I'm not sure what to call it – is a moment in a cemetery. The viewer might imagine a walk on a rainy day; he or she stops before the flooded hole and gazes into it, and for some reason imagines the ocean bottom. We see the instant of the fantasy, and in another instant it will be gone.*'<sup>412</sup> This '*instant of a fantasy*' is painstakingly constructed. Wall worked for nearly two years on this image, which depicts a freshly dug grave filled with the flora and fauna of the underwater sea world of the North Pacific. The image combines different photographs from two cemeteries in Vancouver. The surrounding landscape was shot in the first cemetery, and the foreground with the grave was photographed in the second, as there was already a grave at the first location where Wall wanted to dig.<sup>413</sup> '*The Flooded Grave*' is a combination of seventy-five different images, including documentary outdoor shots and studio photographs, that were joined through digital montage, so, in Wall's words,

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<sup>412</sup> Tumlin 2001, 151.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 152.

*'everything has to be photographed from a single camera position and with the camera set almost the same for every shot. Otherwise, the pieces won't fit together properly.'*<sup>414</sup>

Because of the need to combine photographs from two different locations which did not fit together, Wall and his assistant had to rebuild the area to be photographed in the second cemetery to match the foreground of the first. Their next task was to take a plaster cast from the original grave in the second cemetery. The cast of the grave had to be exactly the right shape and form so that when the images were joined through computer montage they would match. The cast was then brought into Wall's studio, where fibreglass moulds of the visible sides of the grave were produced. The fibreglass moulds and the underwater world, comprising fish, sea-urchins, crabs, starfish, octopus and plants, were then arranged in a tank. To ensure that the underwater world that he created looked authentic, Wall employed a marine-life specialist, and he and his assistant built a white tent over the set so that the lighting would match the exterior light. Wall then took numerous photographs of the tank and its inhabitants, a selection of which would be used in the computer montage. These images were then assembled by Wall's assistant Stephen Waddell, who has executed all his computer work since 1992.<sup>415</sup>

In this instance, the digital montage allowed Wall to fuse his '*documentary*', '*near-documentary*' and '*cinematographic*' ambitions into one image. He documents the landscape of the cemetery with gravestones, crows in the sky, hose-pipes and men in the background, none of which is invented. The underwater world of the North Pacific is recreated in his studio with cinema-like expense, after meticulous research has taken place into which animal and plant species were to be photographed, creating '*near-documentary*' images. When the different images are joined together, the landscape shot with the men loses its documentary status through the digital montage; the whole scenery is used like a set on a film-making production site. But Wall insists that '*the indexical link*' of the picture is still intact: '*I don't think it's [the indexical link] really broken, because everything in "The Flooded Grave" is photograph. The montage is composed of acts of photography, even if there is no simple photographed moment. I don't think any photographic qualities are eliminated, except the single moment in which the entire image was made.*'<sup>416</sup>

'*The Flooded Grave*' is a digital montage that combines different documentary images. The '*indexical link*' referred originally to the analogue image defined through

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<sup>414</sup> Tumlir 2001, 152.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 154. See also Stallabrass 2010, 105-106.

developing with a photochemical process and the supposition that the depicted objects were present at the moment when the picture was taken. The mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was particularly interested in the relationship between the recipient and the depicted subject matter of the photographic image and examined photographs as an indexical sign. In Peirce's view, a photograph offered the possibility of a depiction which resembled the original presented object in front of the camera. But this resemblance could not be taken for granted and depended on the physical production process, i.e. the photochemical process in the darkroom. The result was an image that resembled the depicted object and could therefore be categorized as a sign, which Peirce called '*index*'. The photographic image is regarded as a visual sign or as a form of language. This concept originated from Structuralism, which established modern linguistics as a scientific method and referred to languages as strict systems of signs.<sup>417</sup> The photographic image provided the observer with a message of indexical signs which related, according to the French philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes, to the depicted object. Barthes concluded that a photographic image cannot lie. However, Wall's image is a digital image produced with a computer, so none of these theories can readily be transferred to it. The single documentary landscape shot which he took refers to a formerly existent subject matter that was present at the time when the picture was taken. However, the process of digital montage, which needs an extensive amount of digital manipulation to ensure that the image appears real, ultimately results in the image losing its indexical sign: indexical signs have to relate to the object they refer to. A digital image or montage is more akin to a computer-generated image which requires its own system of interpretation and therefore a new semiology for the digital age. As a digital image is not the product of a photochemical process and given the non-existence of an indexical relationship between the photographic image and its object, Barthes's '*emanation of the past reality*' in a photograph loses its meaning.<sup>418</sup>

'*The Flooded Grave*' triggers associations with late 19<sup>th</sup> century Symbolism, seen by its contemporaries as '*the painting of ideas*'. Symbolism was a cultural climate in which the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud flourished. He argued that a state of unconsciousness exists in the human mind and that it is therefore possible to analyse, through the interpretation of dreams, its symbolic meaning. Symbolism thus rejected the representation of reality and aimed for subject matters with strong metaphorical and symbolic connotations and even dream-like appearances. Wall's '*Flooded Grave*'

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<sup>417</sup> Kloesel (ed.) 1986; Bourdieu (ed.) 1970.

<sup>418</sup> Barthes 2008.

seems to depict the gate to another world. In an ordinary cemetery an open grave, surrounded by other graves and tombstones, is not necessarily unusual, yet a closer look into the grave reveals a seabed. Beneath the surface of the water are marine plants, anemones, crabs and even an octopus. The view is of a peaceful and paradisiacal sea world confined in the space of a grave, which could at any moment be buried under the rough pile of muddy earth on the right-hand side. Here Wall presents a similar idea to the proponents of Symbolism in their dream-like paintings, suggesting that there is a more hidden reality behind the actual, visible world which often engages with matters of religion, mortality or mythology. Wall's open grave seems to allow a view into this hidden reality of a life after death.

Wall's photograph also brings to mind the painting '*Ophelia*' (1851-52) (Plate 32) by Sir John Everett Millais. Admittedly, the subject matter is not exactly comparable, given that humans play a subordinate role in this particular work by Wall; however both artworks are concerned with the general theme of death and water. Interestingly, Millais's '*Ophelia*' relates not only to the overall theme in Wall's photograph, but it also has a comparable production process, as I explain below and which will bring me back to the argument that the work process of these photographers, and in particular the computer-related stage of the process, has brought them closer to painters.

Millais belonged to the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was founded in 1848 and transformed the rules of painting.<sup>419</sup> Before Baudelaire, the Pre-Raphaelites were concerned with subjects from modern everyday life, rejecting traditional Victorian art. Like Baudelaire, they did not oppose the art of the Old Masters, often relating their subject matter to literary and religious themes, but were keen to find new and contemporary ways to work, allowing time to study their objects precisely and applying the light in their paintings after exact and scientific observations. The Pre-Raphaelites painted their subject matters often directly after nature as truthful, realistic and detailed as they possibly could, often completing whole paintings from start to finish '*en plein air*' with a vivid colour palette.<sup>420</sup> The painting depicts Ophelia, a character in William Shakespeare's '*Hamlet*', who is driven mad when her father Polonius is murdered by her lover Hamlet. Ophelia, trying to overcome her grief, walked along a riverbank picking flowers and then fell into the river. The painting depicts her floating down the river and singing, just before drowning. Ophelia appears in an emotional and dramatic

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<sup>419</sup> The founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and, later, James Collinson, as well as the sculptor Thomas Woolner and the author William Michael Rossetti.

<sup>420</sup> Walther (ed.) 1995, Vol. 2, 485-486, 527.

posture, covered with flowers and wearing an embroidered dress that seems to keep her afloat, slowing down the process of drowning. Her death is not seen in the stage play; the spectator learns of her death only through a conversation between Queen Gertrude and Ophelia's brother Laertes. Millais modelled his painting on Gertrude's speech in the fourth act of Shakespeare's play.<sup>421</sup>

He painted '*Ophelia*' in stages, beginning with the actual landscape – an unusual thing to do, given that the background, i.e. the landscape, was considered less important. Most of the time he painted outside on the bank of the Hogsmill River in Ewell, Surrey, concentrating on the accuracy of shrubbery, trees, reeds and wild flowers. But he also included flowers that were mentioned in Gertrude's speech or had a symbolic value, such as nettle for pain, willow for forsaken love and daisy for innocence. In 1851, he worked from June to mid-October up to eleven hours a day, six days a week, facing all sorts of problems while working outside. In a letter to his friend Mrs Combe he described the nuisance caused by flies and swans and the threat of a court appearance for trespass and destruction of hay.<sup>422</sup> In December 1851 work began on '*Ophelia*' in Millais's London studio in Gower Street. Millais worked with a model, a nineteen-year-old woman called Elizabeth Siddall. In order to paint the drowning scene as realistically as possible, he placed his model, wearing a silver embroidered dress, in a bathtub so that he could observe how the heavy gown fell in the water and how Ms Siddall's hair floated on the surface of the water. He began by drawing a few sketches before he started with the actual painting. To ensure great accuracy in the details he drew directly onto the canvas with a pencil and later painted over these marks.<sup>423</sup> As it was winter, Millais tried to keep the water warm by placing oil lamps underneath the bathtub. At one point, he became so caught up in the act of painting that he did not notice when the lamps went out; consequently Elizabeth Siddall became cold and fell ill. Millais was later ordered by her father to pay her medical bills.<sup>424</sup>

Millais did not spare any expense in the creation of '*Ophelia*': he first painted the landscape as a precise, detailed and accurate representation of the flora and fauna of the Hogsmill River, including flowers mentioned in Shakespeare's play, and then painted Ophelia from a model in his studio. Millais's painting, depicting the decisive moment when Ophelia drowns, is therefore a complex illusion and arrangement of this

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<sup>421</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV, vii, ll. 166-184.

<sup>422</sup> Millais 1899.

<sup>423</sup> Curnow n.d.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

moment, something analogue photography could never achieve. But with the changes and possibilities that came about through the use of digital manipulation the boundaries between painting and photography began to blur. Photography was no longer confined to the decisive moment; it could now unite contents from different times and localities. Wall's photograph *'The Flooded Grave'*, not unlike Millais's painting, unites his actual landscape photographs from the cemeteries with the staged images of the underwater world that he had painstakingly created in his studio. Digital photography has brought Wall closer to the production process of painters and the freedom that comes with it to choose when and what he wants to depict, as he points out: *'It's not necessary to have "ideas" to make photographs; what you need is subjects, something to photograph. There must eventually be something in front of the camera, something you have seen, or are seeing, or else something that originated in your imagination, or in something you read, heard, overheard. These are not ideas, they are already images of some kind, even if they have not actually appeared in the world yet.'*<sup>425</sup> Like painting, Wall's photographs are able to unite present, past, and future, offering complex arrangements that often make reference to art history and theory, literary, film or social-critical elements. But these references are not obvious quotations; they are more like subtle footnotes, with many clues that need decoding, in order to understand what lies underneath the visual surface. Wall has invented a unique form of photographic mannerism, whether this be through the way he constructs his compositions, which have put an end to the documentary status of photography, or whether this be through his lightbox presentation that makes use of the advertising industry's familiar mechanisms of seduction. Most of his photographs are at first sight unassuming, and reveal their extensively staged character only slowly, like paintings.

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<sup>425</sup> Reiss 2001.

#### **IV. Photographic Nuances and Variations:**

##### **Contemporary Photographers in Düsseldorf and Vancouver**

##### **1. The Düsseldorf and Vancouver 'Schools' Debate**

The curator and art historian Stefan Gronert has suggested that the term '*Düsseldorf Photo-School*',<sup>426</sup> focusing on Bernd and Hilla Becher's class, is problematic even though it has now established its place in the literature. Gronert has written that it should be used only with regard to photographers who were trained by the Bechers. Furthermore, he points out that the term '*Becher School*', first used in 1988 in an art review by Isabelle Graw, strictly speaking gave the wrong impression, in that the students had finished their studies and were *de facto* no longer '*scholars*'.<sup>427</sup>

The terms '*Becher School*' and '*Becher students*' might have arisen from Peter Galassi's suggestion that this was '*a tightly knit group*',<sup>428</sup> a remark contradicted by Thomas Ruff: when asked during an interview whether there was '*such a thing as a Düsseldorf School*' he replied: '*There was never really a group. [Thomas] Struth was in New York on a stipend when I started my studies. I had little contact with [Axel] Hütte, who was already a senior. The only photography student I was close to was Candida Höfer. Most of my friends at art school were in other classes, for instance Gerhard Richter's painting or Klaus Rinke's sculpture classes. Also, Bernd and Hilla Becher were very busy with their own projects and weren't exactly hanging around the Academy all day with us students. The whole thing was much more relaxed. You could reach them over the phone if you needed them; otherwise they would leave you alone. Sometimes I would visit them at their house. Naturally you would discuss things with both, even though officially Bernd was the professor. But when I think of those days I think of students like Katharina Fritsch, Harald Klingelholler, and Thomas Schütte just as much as people in the photography department.*'<sup>429</sup> In 1976, the Bechers supervised at first only a handful of students in their class at the Academy: Tata Ronkholz, Volker Döhne, Iris Salzmann and Angelika Wengler; nearly all of these gave up their artistic

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<sup>426</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 13-14.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Galassi 2003, 17.

<sup>429</sup> Birnbaum 2003.



work and are therefore hardly ever mentioned in the literature.<sup>430</sup> The term '*Becher class*' is generally used for a later generation of students, of whom nowadays all are internationally well-established and recognized artists, and who can be divided in two groups: the first includes Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth and Axel Hütte, and the second refers to the only two Becher scholars who work digitally: Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff. However, it is not possible to refer to the '*Becher class*' as '*a tightly knit group*',<sup>431</sup> given that attendance in the class varied enormously and/or sometimes overlapped with students not readily associated with the term '*Becher class*'.<sup>432</sup>

While one could definitely say that the strong devotion of the Bechers to their clear concept and serial approach in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* tradition had a strong influence on their students, it is arguable that the Bechers had formed a group which followed their artistic ambitions exclusively in their footsteps. The students developed and modified the Bechers' documentary approach with their personal choices of subject matter, the use of new technologies and their own personalized use of the photographic medium. Although some of them are probably united by one of the Bechers' best-known trademarks, '*the big print*',<sup>433</sup> as well as certain dead-pan elements and sometimes similar-looking subject matter, there are enough exceptions to cast doubt on the idea that this is a unified '*school*'. For example Höfer never bought into the idea of over-dimensional prints and still produces small-scale images,<sup>434</sup> Ruff works with different technical devices including infrared lenses, stereoscopy and composite, internet and computer images, embracing his teacher's rejection of experiment and subjectivity; whereas Gursky nowadays unites *neusachliche* elements with his sometimes computer-generated images<sup>435</sup> and Hütte experiments with various perspectives of construction within the picture and their influence on the perception of his images.<sup>436</sup> In their deployment of colour photography they have all renounced the

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<sup>430</sup> Gronert 2009a; only Ronkholz and Döhne, as Gronert points out, have produced an oeuvre that might find international recognition at some point.

<sup>431</sup> Galassi 2003, 17.

<sup>432</sup> These Becher students attended the class in the following years: Hütte 1973-81, Höfer 1976-82, Gursky 1981-87, Ruff 1977-85, Struth 1973-80. In addition to this well-known group there were also Petra Wunderlich 1978-85, Jörg Sasse 1982-87 and Simone Nieweg 1984-90.

<sup>433</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 7.

<sup>434</sup> Höfer's formats vary between 24x36, 36x52 and 67x81 cm.

<sup>435</sup> Gursky generated and constructed his images '*Untitled XVI*' (2008) and '*Untitled XV*' (2008) with architectural software.

<sup>436</sup> Hütte's diptych '*Castelfiorentino*' (1992) depicts the interior wall of an industrial building, displaying overlapping sections of the same subject matter.

Bechers' black and white approach; they have extended their subject matters far from the pure documentation of industrial archetypes and the strict concept of objectivity which clearly marked the Bechers' practice.

When the Bechers began in the 1960s to systematically depict architectural sites, Düsseldorf and Cologne were already established centres for a vibrant art, media and photography community. During the 1960s and 1970s photography was influenced here by artists like Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. Whereas Beuys, who worked in Düsseldorf, used photography mainly to document his installations, projects and political activities, Polke and Richter began to question the documentary character of photography with their work. For other Düsseldorf artists the photographic medium was a fundamentally important tool for the documentation of their work, in particular for those who worked with performance like Klaus Rinke, Bernhard and Anna Blume and Katharina Sieverding.

While during the 1970s a debate still prevailed about the truthfulness of the photographic image, the 1980s saw the beginning of staged photography. German photography could now be divided into staged and straight photography, something the German art historian Bazon Brock had predicted as early as 1972.<sup>437</sup> The Bechers began to distance themselves from these movements and focused on their concept of objectivity and serial approach, which they vigorously taught to their students. The '*Becher students*' might therefore have been united as a '*school*', meaning '*a group of artists working under the influence of a single master*',<sup>438</sup> during their early studies at the Academy and while Bernd Becher was still alive, but they all developed more individuality and diversity later on. Some of them, often referred to as the '*Struffskys*' (Struth, Ruff, Gursky),<sup>439</sup> are united by their individual ambitions to challenge the borders of the photographic medium, but they cannot all be seen as a unified group, '*working under the influence of a single master*' or linked together '*because they come from a particular region or town or practise the same local style*'.<sup>440</sup> Their works show the influence of photographic trends and developments in Düsseldorf and Cologne from the 1970s onward, combining staged elements with objective ones, and incorporating elements evidencing their interest in street photography (Arthur H. Felling, known as Weegee, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eugène Atget), as well as their interest in the American photography (Walker Evans, Stephen Shore, Edward Ruscha).

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<sup>437</sup> Brock 1972.

<sup>438</sup> Clarke (ed.) 2001, 218.

<sup>439</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 7.

<sup>440</sup> Clarke (ed.) 2001, 218.

Similar problems arise with the utility of the term '*Vancouver School of Photo-Conceptualism*',<sup>441</sup> first used by the art historian Jean-François Chevrier when he included works of the Vancouver artists Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and Roy Arden in his '*Photokunst*' exhibition in Stuttgart in 1989. The term refers to a group of artists that includes, in addition to the already mentioned Wall, Wallace and Arden, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas.<sup>442</sup> The term '*Vancouver School*' emerged in the 1960s and became popular in the 1980s: it refers to a group of artists working with photography, film, video installations and other pictorial media which often capture superficial narrative elements of complex origins. Some of the works are supported by additional publications, allowing a certain visibility of the theories behind the actual studio practice and work in the tradition of conceptual art.

In contrast to the Becher students, who accept their categorization, some members of the '*Vancouver School*' object to the term; others accept it reluctantly. Roy Arden would like '*to kill that expression*',<sup>443</sup> preferring to be seen as an individual, whereas Ian Wallace now accepts the term, but is of the opinion that it should refer also to the next generation of artists of this particular movement.<sup>444</sup> It all started with Ian Wallace, who taught art history at the University of British Columbia from 1967 to 1970, and then worked from 1972 to 1998 at the Vancouver Art School, now the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Wallace is seen as a figurehead of Canadian photographic Conceptualism. He supervised Wall's MA and also taught Arden, Douglas and Graham. Wall later became a teacher as well and taught Arden, Graham and Lum. This is an interactive and collaborative group of artists who are well connected either through their studies or their supervisory relationships or their published work about each other. For example, Roy Arden studied at the Emily Carr Institute with Ian Wallace and Ian Baxter, who taught Wallace and Wall.<sup>445</sup> Arden's MA was later supervised by Jeff Wall. Ken Lum was a student of Wallace and Wall. Rodney Graham was taught by Wallace while at Simon Fraser University and still seems to play in a band with Wall which at one point united Wall, Graham and Wallace. Therefore the

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<sup>441</sup> Lederman 2007.

<sup>442</sup> Stan Douglas is best known for his film and video installations; his work is therefore discussed in Chapter VI.

<sup>443</sup> Lederman 2007.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Cramp 2003.

group is linked through educational background, collaboration, publications about each others' work<sup>446</sup> and friendship, but *de facto* no formal school exists.

Wallace and Wall's relationship was the key to establishing a Vancouver art movement, as Roy Arden has pointed out: '*Nobody really wants these silly labels like "Vancouver School" and "photo-conceptualism". But there was a tendency and it had to do with Ian and Jeff being very erudite and socially or politically conscious. Before Jeff and Ian, the predominant tendency here was Romantic and what we would have called at the time flaky – not very rigorous, not very historical. And there was from Ian and Jeff a reaction to that. I was definitely drawn to it.*'<sup>447</sup> Wallace and Wall began to question conceptual art approaches and mass media and engaged actively with their 'students' in a dialogue and collaborative work; what is called a 'school' might seem to be more a group of peers. Roy Arden, for example, studied with Wallace in the late 1970s at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design; after working and exhibiting as an artist for almost a decade, he began his studies with Wall in the late 1980s at the University of British Columbia. Therefore, one might doubt that this was a teacher–student relationship, rather that it was one of equal exchange or collaboration.

While it might be problematic to use the term 'school', what we encounter in the situation in Düsseldorf and Vancouver is the outcome of a set of interactions within groups that created an artistic trend concerning the use of photography and occasionally using similar work methods and approaches, but often in a highly individual manner, as will be shown below. Therefore it seems more appropriate to use the term 'movement' in relation to the Düsseldorf and Vancouver groups. However, to dismiss the terms 'Vancouver School' and 'Düsseldorf School' entirely might not be of any help either given that they allow us to categorize these artistic movements for art-historical research, but it carries the danger of simplifying the often complex work of these individual artists.

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<sup>446</sup> Wall published essays on the work of all members of the group except Stan Douglas. He wrote an essay about Rodney Graham's work, '*Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham's Work*', for his solo exhibition at Vancouver Art Gallery in 1988 (Wall 2007c). In 1990, he published '*Four Essays on Ken Lum*' (Wall 1990). He also wrote an essay about Roy Arden's work titled '*An Artist and his Model*' for Arden's solo exhibition at Vancouver's Art Gallery in 1993 (Wall 1993). Ian Wallace wrote on the work of Lum and Arden in Vancouver's art magazine *Vanguard*. Arden and Lum published articles on Vancouver's art scene as well. In 2000, for example, Arden published his article '*After Photography*' (Arden 2006) in the *Canadian Art Magazine*. Arden and Wall also jointly published articles like '*La Photographie d'art, expression parfaite du reportage, The Dignity of the Photograph*' (Arden/Wall 1999).

<sup>447</sup> Baker 2008.

This chapter investigates the formative academic environments of Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall and takes a closer look at their academic institutions and how much these artists were influenced by their surroundings. It also examines Gursky's and Wall's teachers and mentors and asks whether their education and training has left a visible mark on their work. The chapter then goes on to look at the oeuvre of their fellow students in order to identify influential elements and to document the diversity of approaches and works we encounter. Finally, it investigates both movements in order to evaluate similarities and differences in their approach.

## **2. The Bechers: Teaching at the Düsseldorf Art Academy**

The Düsseldorf Art Academy was the first state-owned institution for higher education in fine arts in Germany.<sup>448</sup> From the beginning, several famous artists taught at the Academy: Paul Klee, Ewald Mataré, Karl Otto Götz and Joseph Beuys. Several of their students became established artists, such as, for example, Anselm Kiefer,<sup>449</sup> Sigmar Polke<sup>450</sup> and Gerhard Richter.<sup>451</sup> The Academy in Düsseldorf created the perfect environment for a vibrant post-war avant-garde scene which included influential and internationally recognized artists who left their mark on students. This environment provided the Becher students with a lively intellectual exchange and inter-disciplinary opportunities, and seems to have offered a close artistic network for students like Gursky.

In the mid-1980s, while Gursky was a student at the Academy, Kasper König became professor of the newly founded chair for '*art and publicity*'. König was a well-known figure in the art scene and organizer of the internationally recognized '*Westkunst*' exhibition in 1981.<sup>452</sup> He joined other famous names at the Art Academy like Gerhard Richter, who taught as a professor of painting from 1971 to 1993. König might have met Wall and Richter earlier, during his time in Halifax, where he was

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<sup>448</sup> Kricke/Sackenheim (eds.) 1975.

<sup>449</sup> Anselm Kiefer studied with Joseph Beuys 1970-72.

<sup>450</sup> Sigmar Polke studied at the Academy 1961-67. In 1977 he was appointed to a chair at the Academy for Fine Arts at Hamburg.

<sup>451</sup> Gerhard Richter studied with Karl Otto Götz and Friedrich Macketanz 1961-64. He was offered a chair in painting at the Academy in 1971.

<sup>452</sup> The exhibition included works by Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace.

responsible for the publications of the Nova Scotia College Press from 1973 to 1977.<sup>453</sup> Back in Düsseldorf, König introduced Gursky to Wall,<sup>454</sup> who was one of the visiting artists in König's exchange programme at the Academy from 1981 to 1987.<sup>455</sup> In 1987, König helped Gursky with an application for a graduate scholarship. When Bernd Becher refused to write the necessary reference for Gursky, König asked Richter, who supplied the second recommendation for the scholarship which helped Gursky to establish himself as an artist after completing his studies.<sup>456</sup> Gursky, now an established artist himself, followed in the footsteps of the Bechers, Jeff Wall and Thomas Ruff<sup>457</sup> and started teaching at the Düsseldorf Academy in the summer term of 2010, interestingly not in the photography class but in the newly established class of fine art (*freie Kunst*).<sup>458</sup>

When the Bechers began to teach photography as part of the curriculum at the Academy things were different. In 1976, Bernd Becher was offered the very first chair for photography in Germany, teaching together with his wife Hilla until 1999.<sup>459</sup> Their own education differed significantly from that of their students. Bernd Becher trained from 1947 to 1950 as a scenery painter and studied painting at the Art Academy in Stuttgart with Karl Rössing, a graphic artist and illustrator, from 1953 to 1956. As an autodidact, Becher taught himself the necessary photographic knowledge. From 1957 to 1961, he studied typography at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, where he met his wife to be: Hildegard Wobeser.<sup>460</sup> Training as a photographer in a Potsdam laboratory,

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<sup>453</sup> In 1978, Richter was a visiting professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Wall worked as an assistant professor 1974-75 at the same institution.

<sup>454</sup> With the help of Kasper König Gursky also met the American Dan Graham: Galassi 2003, 20.

<sup>455</sup> Tousley 2002a.

<sup>456</sup> Galassi 2003, 27.

<sup>457</sup> The Bechers were succeeded by Jeff Wall in 1999, who resigned in April 2000 after being threatened at gunpoint by a former Becher student. Wall was succeeded by Thomas Ruff, who taught at the Academy 2001-06.

<sup>458</sup> Kunstmarkt.com n.d.

<sup>459</sup> Galassi 2003, 15: '*The appointment certainly recognized the international art world reputation they had achieved. Because of a strict rule governing academic appointment, the professorship belonged to Bernd alone. But his students were well aware that Hilla was a full partner in the Bechers' art, all the more so since Bernd regularly conducted critiques of individual students' work at the couple's home on the outskirts of Düsseldorf.*' See also Mißelbeck 1993.

<sup>460</sup> Mißelbeck (ed.) 1996, 50. Read (ed.) 1997, 51.

Hilla had worked as a commercial and aerial photographer in Hamburg since 1955. In 1957, she moved to Düsseldorf and worked at the Troost advertisement agency, where she met Walter Breker,<sup>461</sup> who taught 'applied graphics' (*angewandte Graphik*) at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. While studying graphic arts with Breker, Hilla Becher took part in setting up a photographic centre at the Academy, which then still formed part of the Department of Graphic Arts.<sup>462</sup> As this shows, both Bechers already had experience with photography either through professional training (Hilla) or self-teaching (Bernd), and both had studied with trained graphic artists and illustrators very much in the tradition of handicrafts. The graphic arts were in a way torn between their application as fine arts and their purposive use for illustrations, advertising or posters; however, this was a subject that necessarily united artistic with technical and mechanical craftsmanship, a fact that, as we will see, became more than useful for their photographic work.

Around the 1960s, when the Bechers were studying, photography, still seen as craftsmanship, slowly began to find its way into the curriculum of art academies, which must have helped to change the public perception from photographic craft to photographic art. When the Bechers were offered the first chair for photography in the mid-1970s, they were already well established artists, having being awarded a fellowship from the British Council in 1966 to photograph in England, photographing industrial sites in America, Holland, Belgium and Germany, as well as working on their series of '*Framework Houses*' for nearly twenty years. Despite this, their work was still not well known to the German public and, as the art historian Stefan Gronert remarked, they were seen as outsiders portraying the slag heaps of industrial sites and giving them an unjustified aesthetic touch.<sup>463</sup> The establishment of a pure photography class at one of Germany's finest art academies was therefore a real success for the couple. And now, with Gursky's appointment as a professor teaching a fine-art class, photography is on a level with the fine arts.

The Becher students were educated in a different environment from that of their teachers: studying at a fine-art academy offered them the option to learn about photography in a non-commercial way and also gave them inter-disciplinary options, allowing them to join other courses and seminars and experience different classes in their first year. Thomas Ruff remarked in an interview for example that the students

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<sup>461</sup> Meister 1991, 165 *et seq.*

<sup>462</sup> Finkeldey/Müller (eds.) 1991, 104; Kricke/Sackenheim (eds.) 1975.

<sup>463</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009.

could take part in seminars by Benjamin Buchloh on Minimalistic and Conceptual art.<sup>464</sup> In their second year the students had to decide between fine arts and art education. Some of the Becher students, however, studied other subjects in addition to their main subject (photography) or had already graduated from other studies or had acquired previous job experience. Gursky, as already mentioned, studied visual communication at the Folkwangschule in Essen, a subject that was covered by the design department which also included photography and industrial design. Unknowingly at the time, Gursky had chosen a similar subject to his future teachers: learning the trade of visual communication he got to know how to arrange and realize graphics as well as how to properly mediate visual information through graphic design and/or photographs. Other Becher students, like Thomas Struth, attended painting classes or studied completely different subjects, like Axel Hütte, who did a degree in sociology; others, like Candida Höfer, had already trained as photographers.

The Bechers' tuition was characterized by their own clear and conceptual approach which they had jointly begun to develop from the end of the 1960s. Their aim was to create a pictorial encyclopaedia of industrial subject matters. Their whole oeuvre consists of architectural sites, in particular ordinary houses or industrial buildings, e.g. water towers, gas containers, blast-furnaces, winding-towers and manufacturing plants. A series of buildings is united by their functional commonalities, for example the '*Siegener Fachwerkhäuser*' series (1954-61/74) depicting ordinary timber-framed houses in the town of Siegen in North Rhine-Westphalia which are united by their traditional building method; another series titled '*Fördertürme*' (1965-96) (Plate 33) depicting winding-towers is united by their common technical functions.

In order to achieve an encyclopaedic character for their work they decided to photograph exclusively in series, an approach that found its use in the art world since the 1960s and which was mainly seen as an objective method that set out a strong counterpoint to post-war subjectivity, represented in Germany's photography primarily through Otto Steinert. With the rise of concept art at the end of the 1960s, characterized through a more playful approach with different media as well as performances, photography became more accepted as an independent art medium; and with art movements like Pop Art, favouring techniques of mass visual culture and putting a strong emphasis on sometimes banal subject matters of the everyday, there

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<sup>464</sup> Birnbaum 2003.



was more than an opening for the Bechers to gain acceptance for their serial depiction of industrial sites.<sup>465</sup>

To ensure objectivity and a realistic depiction, the Bechers rejected the idea of a subjective view of a subject matter depicted in a single image and instead aimed for serial images. A series demanded comparable viewing and to achieve the necessary comparability they always tried to have similar conditions while photographing. The images deliberately waive any form of personal interpretation and comprise strict compositions where the object is often depicted from the front with a neutral background and an even light distribution without any disruptive elements like shadows or the appearance of humans. The architectural object takes centre stage and is depicted free from distortion with a depth of focus from a slightly higher vantage point: all motifs were photographed exclusively with a view camera in black and white as another measure to ensure the objective and neutral depiction of their objects.

As a general principle, in the view of the Bechers, only a series of depictions of an object could describe it sufficiently. The decision as to how many images of an object were taken depended on the structure of the architectural object. In order to clarify the structure of an object, a symmetrical one needed fewer images than an asymmetrical one. To avoid a one-dimensional view, most objects were depicted from a front elevation (*Aufriß*) and a corner to allow for a so-called '*Gegenüberstellung*' (opposition). In another method, called '*Abwicklung*' (unwinding), the photographer walks around an object and photographs it at every 45-degree point, resulting in eight images which are then displayed in a row.<sup>466</sup> Other objects were photographed from the front, the back, a side and a corner. The images were then displayed in groups of eight, nine, twelve or fifteen plates and arranged as a '*Tafel*' (plate).<sup>467</sup> Through the order of the plates the objects began to correspond vertically, horizontally and diagonally with each other, an occurrence that Bernd Becher described as a '*Klang*'.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> The 1960s showed a rise of seriality in modern and contemporary art for example Andy Warhol's series of thirty-two paintings of Campbell's Soup cans which he exhibited for the first time at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962 and two years later, in 1964, his stacks of Brillo boxes were displayed at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Other artist using a serial approach followed: Ed Ruscha's photographic series of parking lots (1967), Donald Judd's series of twenty six woodcuts (1961-69), On Kawara's series of '*Today*' paintings (1966), Sol le Witt's sculpture series of cubes '*Two Open Modular Cubes / Half Off*' (1972).

<sup>466</sup> This method can be seen in the series '*Fachwerkhäuser im Siegerland*' (1977). Plates in: Honnef/Sachsse/Thomas (eds.) 1997, 330-331; Finkeldey/Müller (eds.) 1991, 93.

<sup>467</sup> The images were often displayed in two formats, 30x40 or 50x60 cm.

<sup>468</sup> Krief 2004.

'Klang' literally means a tone or sound; in this particular circumstance it probably refers more to a *resonance*, given that each of the images responds to the other. The overall aim of these precise serial depiction and presentation methods was to exclude the subjective view of the photographer. Crucial to the accurate realization of their methods was a profound knowledge of photographic craftsmanship and the strict application of their compositional guidelines. Through the serial grouping of objects photographed under strictly standardized conditions, the Bechers enabled a comparative view that would emphasize similar forms and construction patterns. The serial depiction of objects would visualize their functional and formal characteristics, forming a typology of these extensively enumerated architectural objects.

As already mentioned, both Bechers had trained with graphic artists and illustrators; Hilla Becher had even worked as a commercial photographer. A brief examination of advertisements utilizing photography therefore allows an intriguing comparison of the composition and style of the Bechers' images. German advertisements at the end of the 1950s and during 1960s, a time when the Bechers began to develop their serial approach, often showed similar compositions. Volker Albus has pointed out that products were often photographed singly, taking centre stage in front of a neutral background from a slightly higher vantage point without any shadows or distortions, something that can be seen in an advertisement for the German company Braun by Otl Aicher in 1958.<sup>469</sup> They were portrayed like '*signs*' to ensure an objective and neutral depiction of the product, in '*typologies of genres*'.<sup>470</sup> Often only the photographic depiction revealed the function and use of the product; any sort of text or subtitles was excluded. The photographic image, as Albus remarked, was used as a means to replicate the product in an objective and realistic way; however, as with the art scene, there was also a tendency towards a somewhat subjective movement of commercial photography that would try to capture '*the personality*' of the product in their advertisements with all means of the photographic medium, for example making use of favourable '*light arrangements and interesting backgrounds*'.<sup>471</sup>

The oeuvre of the Bechers has to be seen in the tradition of '*Neue Sachlichkeit*'. The rejection of Pictorialism in the 1920s and 1930s paved the way for a photographic movement that aimed for objectivity, which was thrust aside by National Socialism. The Bechers picked up the threads of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, producing photographs in succession to Albert Renger-Patzsch, a pioneer of '*Neue Sachlichkeit*' who argued for

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<sup>469</sup> Albus 1997, 208 (plate on same page).

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 208-209.

a photography that would be concerned with objective depiction before considering any sort of artistic ambition. Renger-Patzsch mainly depicted objects and motifs of everyday life, like industrial buildings and machines. He rejected the project of the Bauhaus in assembling and constructing photographic images, and he also refused to include surrealistic elements. For him photography had to be seen as craftsmanship which should be used to record our surroundings in a plain and objective way. When, in 1928, his influential photographic works went into print the publisher favoured a title that could not have been more misleading in regard to Renger-Patzsch's intention: instead of naming the book '*Die Dinge*' (The objects, literally: The things) it was titled '*Die Welt ist schön*' (The world is beautiful).<sup>472</sup>

The Bechers' photographs are stylistically influenced by Renger-Patzsch. In regard to their systematic work approach they show parallels to Karl Blossfeldt and August Sander, who both photographed in typological series in order to highlight common characteristics of their subject matters and to allow for comparison between a series. Blossfeldt, well known for his book '*Urformen der Kunst*' (1928), took these photographs, as we have already seen,<sup>473</sup> to illustrate his lectures. Blossfeldt was driven not by any artistic ambition, but by his interest in science. From 1898, he had collected and prepared plants for his photographs in order to document their forms and structures. His detailed macro-photographs of plants highlighted their different details and structures and allowed for comparison between the forms of nature and architectural forms. International recognition followed after a review of Blossfeldt's book in 1928 by Walter Benjamin, who interpreted his work in the context of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>474</sup>

The oeuvre of the former miner August Sander also shows an encyclopaedic character. Sander, a self-taught photographer, is often seen as an early exponent of conceptual art owing to his strict systematic approach, which can be compared with the Bechers'. At first, Sander was more interested in Pictorialism, but in the 1920s he began taking serial portrait photographs. His aim was to capture a representative profile of society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by depicting typical professions and members of different social classes. Working as if to make an inventory of humans, he photographed people in a position characteristic of their profession, often positioning the camera right in front of them. Sander's typology of society was never finished, but

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<sup>472</sup> Michalski 2003, 188-191.

<sup>473</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>474</sup> Honnef/Honnef-Harling (eds.) 2003, 281.

in 1929 a first volume of his work was published titled '*Antlitz der Zeit – Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*' (Faces of our Time – People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century).<sup>475</sup>

The oeuvre of the Bechers has to be seen in the context of *Neue Sachlichkeit* described above, in which Renger-Patzsch, Blossfeldt and Sander are highly influential figures. The Bechers are united with these photographers through their aim to depict their subject matter with the utmost objectivity, their interest in the documentary and analytical ability of photography and their insistence on high-quality photographic craftsmanship. The classification of their work as concept art was mainly due to their strictly standardized conditions while photographing, clearly defining in detail the practical process of recording a subject matter in order to achieve an objective description of it. In addition to their photographic documentation they also documented the dates of the depicted architecture in writing including its construction, function and output.<sup>476</sup> As in a scientific handbook or a manual, they expanded on the photographic part of their work with the collection of descriptive data. When in 1969 their photographs of industrial buildings were published, the Bechers chose the title '*Anonyme Skulpturen*' (Anonymous Sculptures), making reference to a well-established art format.<sup>477</sup> Through their method of serial photography they depicted as an aesthetic object a purely functional architecture that was built without any artistic intention, a fact which secured for their work a place in the fine arts.

The art historian Stefan Gronert has stated that the Bechers' aim for '*objectivity and anonymity*' also needs to be seen as an attempt to establish a distance from Steinert's concept of subjective photography, which in their view was a necessary step to allow for a new visual vocabulary in post-war Germany.<sup>478</sup> The Bechers' therefore guided their students very much in their own tradition, to find a theme for their work and to examine it systematically. In their view, the students were not bound together by the objects they depicted or their choice of medium, but by a clear concept and a serial approach. The students' task was to examine a theme thoroughly in all its aspects in a similar way to a scientist, marking out their rules and parameters for a test series in order to exclude any elements of subjectivity and achieve comparability throughout the series. All the Becher students followed this approach and even though there are slight variations in their work, most of them investigated at least one theme over a longer period of time with a serial approach. Gursky started with his series '*Security Guards*'

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<sup>475</sup> Thomas 1998.

<sup>476</sup> Haase 1981.

<sup>477</sup> Becher/Becher 1969.

<sup>478</sup> Gronert 2009b.

(1982-85), and Hütte was interested in entrance halls and tube stations. Ruff took pictures of living rooms in the Black Forest region, Tata Ronkholz depicted pump-rooms of the *Ruhrgebiet* and Boris Becker's favourite subject was World War II blockhouses. Martin Rosswog, a former Becher student, once said that Bernd Becher always encouraged students to investigate their subjects over a period of time, given his chief interest in the comparative view, a formal unification, an isolation of the object and a classical composition of the picture.<sup>479</sup> All the Becher students worked during their studies with the same principles; the most important one was to avoid any sort of manipulative intervention and personal touches which could occur when light effects, colour or dramatic perspective were used. Their task was also to create, as far as possible, the same conditions when depicting a subject matter in a series and to try for the utmost objectivity. In addition, Bernd Becher reminded his students that it was no longer their objective to strive for the recognition of photography as an art medium. This he felt had already been established: their work had equal status with painting and they were not registered in his class only to work and make a living in the arts and crafts.<sup>480</sup> The students benefited from the Bechers' view, enabling them to concentrate purely on the content of their photographic work without worrying about claiming their place on the artistic Mount Olympus of painting and sculpture.

### **3. Gursky's Fellow Students: Variations of *Becherism***

Bernd and Hilla Becher taught their students either at the Academy or at their house, a former paper-mill in Düsseldorf-Kaiserswerth. Gronert points out that the students were encouraged to study the work of their teachers and to make an effort to examine the practice and oeuvre of other photographers, such as Eugène Atget, Walker Evans and Stephen Shore, as well as studying relevant exhibition catalogues and books about photography.<sup>481</sup> Gursky, as already mentioned, attended the Bechers' class at the same time as Höfer, Struth, Hütte and Ruff.<sup>482</sup> Common to all of them, in particular at an early stage in their careers, was the rejection of any experimentation and subjectivity in their work; they produced series and their images showed a certain distance from the depicted object and an extraordinary depth of focus. Their oeuvre

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<sup>479</sup> Meister 1991, 168.

<sup>480</sup> Gronert 2009a.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>482</sup> Galassi 2003, 17.

consists of different themes and contains architectural subject matter, landscapes and portraits as well as interiors, but they all seem to have a preference for living spaces like houses, cities, places of leisure and work, themes that still can be found in Gursky's oeuvre. Working thematically caused some problems for the Becher students, as Gursky points out: *'After my degree our work did occasionally overlap within the Becher circle, which sometimes caused headaches.'*<sup>483</sup> Because everyone had at first the same interests in subject matter and worked with the same principles, similarities were obvious. However, the Becher circle is also characterized by its students' ability to develop their teachers' method for their individual use, as is shown by an analysis of Gursky's contemporary fellow students.<sup>484</sup>

The Becher student who has probably stuck most closely to the Bechers' original approach and strict method is Candida Höfer. Höfer, born in 1944, is only ten years younger than Hilla Becher and was already a trained photographer like Hilla when she studied at the Düsseldorf Academy from 1973 to 1982. At first, in 1973, she attended Ole John's film and stage design class for a period of three years. She then went on to join the Bechers' class in 1976, applying with a series of photographs, started in 1972, depicting Turkish foreign workers in the German Rhine region.<sup>485</sup> For her Turkish workers series (which she continued until 1979) she was already using a serial approach, allowing comparable views of the portraits and interiors, but not in the sense of the Bechers' encyclopaedic approach. However, her images retain a certain encyclopaedic character in the way that they illustrate the Turkish immigration in Germany.<sup>486</sup> Höfer began to photograph the so-called '*Gastarbeiter*' (guest-workers) in the 1970s, at a time when the German government still took the view that the Turkish '*guest-workers*' were living temporarily in Germany and would leave at some point. Her images illustrated very clearly that people cannot be expected only to carry out their work duties while living in a foreign country: they will always start at some point to make themselves at least feel at home by constructing a familiar infrastructure around them. Therefore Turkish workers brought their families to Germany and began to open shops and restaurants and to build mosques. Höfer's aim was to showcase changes in Cologne caused by immigration; her series presents the living conditions and

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<sup>483</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10-11.

<sup>484</sup> As already explained, there was a huge variation and overlap over time in attendance at the Bechers' class. Therefore this analysis focuses on those students whose attendance roughly overlapped with that of Andreas Gursky.

<sup>485</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 25.

<sup>486</sup> Höfer 1977; Höfer 1980.

circumstances of Turkish immigrants consisting of single, group and family portraits as well as photographs in typical male-dominated Turkish cafés or in grocery shops. Höfer seems to have directed her sitters: people look directly into the camera, are arranged in groups or occupy dominant spots in the overall composition. This series also included images of public interiors, such as for example a deserted Turkish restaurant: this is a subject matter that gained more importance over time in Höfer's oeuvre.<sup>487</sup>

Most of the time Höfer has worked with a 35 mm miniature camera without a tripod,<sup>488</sup> which allows her to move more easily through space and gives her a certain degree of spontaneity; nevertheless her photographs are carefully composed. Her subject matters are often depicted with a wide-angle lens without artificial lightning; unlike the rest of the Becher class, she has retained the small-scale format.<sup>489</sup>

From the mid-1970s she began to shoot in colour even though this incurred considerable expense, as the Düsseldorf Art Academy did not have facilities to develop and print in colour, a fact that changed only in 1983, when Höfer graduated,<sup>490</sup> and which entailed interesting consequences for the remaining Becher students.

Hilla Becher once explained in an interview that she and her husband travelled regularly in the 1970s between Germany and the United States.<sup>491</sup> In 1973, Hilla met Stephen Shore in New York, introducing him to her husband Bernd.<sup>492</sup> Two years later, in 1975, Shore and the Bechers took part in, as it turned out, an important exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The Assistant Curator William Jenkins had organized a show comprising 168 works of ten photographers<sup>493</sup>, including

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<sup>487</sup> For example photographs like '*Händelstrasse, Köln*' (1976) or '*Karlsstrasse, Düsseldorf*' (1977). Plates in: Honnef/Schürmann 1979.

<sup>488</sup> Since 1997 Höfer has worked with a 6x6 cm Hasselblad; since 2003 she has also worked with a view camera.

<sup>489</sup> The measurements of her images vary between 24x36, 36x52 and 67x81 cm and around 1.50x1.50 m for her later work.

<sup>490</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 26.

<sup>491</sup> Apparently so much so that their son Max Becher decided to stay in the U.S.

<sup>492</sup> Stephen Shore's influence on German photography and in particular in regard to his friendship with the Bechers resulted in 1994 in an exhibition at the Westfälische Kunstverein Münster. The exhibition catalogue contained an interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher by Heinz Liesbrock: Liesbrock (ed.) 1994. In 2010-11 (11<sup>th</sup> September 2010-16<sup>th</sup> January 2011) an exhibition titled '*Der rote Bulli. Stephen Shore und die Neue Düsseldorfer Fotografie*' at the NRW Forum drew attention to Shore's influence on the Becher class: Schaden (ed.) 2010.

<sup>493</sup> The exhibition included Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nikolas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel, Jr.. Salvesen 2009, 11.

the Bechers as the only European artists. Jenkins named the exhibition '*New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*'.<sup>494</sup> At the time, the exhibition got mixed reactions from its few visitors as the published interviews by the university student Joe Deal demonstrate.<sup>495</sup> The exhibition nonetheless caused a significant stir in the art world, as Salvesen points out: '*Their appearance together in New Topographics – however little it may have altered their creative development and however few people saw the show itself – associated these artists with a significant shift in attitude towards the landscape as photographic subject and cultural preoccupation.*'<sup>496</sup> New Topographics had not only had an influence on landscape art, but it also united different subject areas like geography, urban studies and photography, resulting in the plain representation of Americas overlooked spaces.

Salvesen went on to remark: '*Today New Topographics, considered as a style, seems more durable than the tract houses depicted in the images.*'<sup>497</sup> Jenkins had already described the exhibition in the introduction to his catalogue at the time as '*a stylistic event*' and explained that '*the actual photographs are far richer in meaning and scope than the simple making of an aesthetic point.*'<sup>498</sup> The photographers included were united by an interest in landscape photography that excluded humans as well as anything picturesque or romantic. Instead, they photographed subject matters that were otherwise overlooked, like caravan sites (Adams), foundation constructions (Baltz), coal breakers (Bechers), urban developments (Deal), parking lots (Gohlke), cityscapes (Nixon), motels (Schott), street junctions (Shore), urban houses (Wessel).

Salvesen remarked about the commonalities of these photographers: '*[...] we might first observe that all the prints are "straight", exhibiting sharp focus, tonal range, minimal grain, and full frame printing.*'<sup>499</sup> With regard to subject matter, she pointed out: '*[...] all photographers portray the built environment, without apparent distortion or intervention, and without imposing an obvious judgement or agenda. The nine bodies of work reveal patterns, trace resemblances, or gather types.*'<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> Salvesen 2009, 11; In 2009, the George Eastman House and the Center for Creative Photography re-created the exhibition and published a new exhibition catalogue that included a facsimile of Jenkin's catalogue from 1975. See also Salvesen 2009, 247-261.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 9, 53, 54.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 51.



Salvesen concludes that the exhibition had three key outcomes: *'The emergence of photography as a key component in postmodernist critical theory was one of three important factors shaping the historiography of New Topographics in the early 1980s. Another was the style's dissemination in Europe, and a third was the teaching activity of the participants, in both the U.S. and Europe.'*<sup>501</sup> With regard to the connection between American and German photography, Salvesen pointed out that Adams, Baltz, Deal, Gohlke, and Shore exhibited works at Michael Schmidt's Werkstatt für Photographie in Kreuzberg, Berlin, which he founded in 1976. Schmidt, a former teacher of Gursky, was himself influenced by the New Topographics.<sup>502</sup> Salvesen also remarked that *'several of the American photographers travelled to meet their European counterparts and teach workshops.'*<sup>503</sup>

The Bechers' acquaintance with Shore proved to be a particular inspiring connection. When they first meet in 1973, the 26-year-old Shore had already worked in Andy Warhol's factory and exhibited his photographs in 1971 in the New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Bechers got interested, as Hilla puts it, in Shore's *'approach' and 'method' as well as 'the very good quality of handicraft and how he worked with colour'*, and in 1977, shortly after the Bechers had been appointed at the Art Academy, Shore exhibited his work in Düsseldorf.<sup>504</sup>

Hilla Becher also explained that the purchase of *'a colour-machine'* caused the students to experiment very enthusiastically with colour photography, which induced Bernd Becher to introduce the class to the work of Stephen Shore and the book *'New Colour Photography'*; as Hilla puts it, *'He shoved it [the book] under their nose.'*<sup>505</sup> The

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>502</sup> See also Chapter II.

<sup>503</sup> Salvesen 2009, 57; with regard to the students of the Bechers, in particular Ruff, Höfer, Struth and Gursky, Salvesen points to their biographer Susanne Lang, who explained that the students *'have taken their mentors' documentary style "to absurdity", so that "abstract categories such as serial sequence, order, and structure become the actual subject matter of the image", the impact heightened by vivid colour and immense scale.'* See Salvesen 2009, 57 and Lange 2007, 84.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>505</sup> Hilla Becher in a filmed interview: *'Und ganz besonders interessiert waren wir eben an seiner Einstellung, seiner Methode, an seiner guten, sehr guten handwerklichen Qualität und wie er mit Farbe umgegangen ist und als in der Akademie zum ersten Mal eine Farbmaschine da war und die Studenten die Chance hatten, sind sie natürlich mit fliegenden Fahnen auf Farbe gegangen und haben damit experimentiert. Und da hat der Bernd ihnen gesagt, da müßt ihr euch unbedingt mal Stephen Shore und das Buch "New Colour Photography" ansehen und das*

Bechers also began to collect Shore's photographs and, as the art historian Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen explains, '[they] used them in their lectures at the *Kunstakademie Düsseldorf*, encouraging students such as Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, and Axel Hütte to "see the everyday".'<sup>506</sup> The Art Academy's investment in colour printing facilities, combined with the encounter with Shore's photographs, seems to have had an important influence on the students. Not only did they begin to renounce the Bechers' black and white approach, but they also extended their subject matters away from their teachers' pure documentation of industrial archetypes, as well as moving away from the strict concept of objectivity which clearly marked their practice.

In the early 1980s, Höfer began to shoot public interiors, a subject matter that can also be found in the oeuvre of her fellow students. She photographed, for example, libraries, museums, theatres, lecture halls and gymnasiums and seems to have a special interest in locations of public assembly, which are also places of preservation, safeguarding cultural knowledge. When asked whether her choice of depicting cultural places such as theatres, libraries and museums is to stress the traces of cultural memory rather than architectural forms, Höfer replied: '*Not in such a fundamentalist way. To some extent these particular building types do represent social habits which, although very slowly, seem to go out of use or at least change fundamentally in the way they are used: presence in the theatre is being replaced by tele-presence, books in libraries become virtual, and also museums are changing in the way they present objects. At the same time, however, to me these spaces have their own character and vitality revealing in their displays the layer of time and experiences through which they have come to the present, and they seem to resist such changes.*'<sup>507</sup> The Bechers had a similar starting point: their aim was to document the traces and appearances of industrial buildings and construction sites, as well as region-specific architectures, which they saw as '*anonymous sculptures*'. In contrast to Höfer, however, the Bechers sometimes competed in a race against time before demolition.

Höfer's interiors are made exclusively for public use, therefore it is quite striking that human beings are rarely present in these public spaces, and if they are depicted, they just appear at the periphery; consequently the interior itself becomes a prominent eye-catcher. Höfer, like the Bechers, examines a theme over a period of time, but unlike the

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*hat er denen immer vor die Nase gehalten.*' Transcribed and translated by the author. Photography Collection Net n.d.; The book '*New Colour Photography*' (1981) by Sally Eaclair examined more than forty photographers, including Steven Shore.

<sup>506</sup> Schmidt-Wulffen 2004, 15.

<sup>507</sup> Pratesi 2009.

Bechers she varies the viewpoint of her subject matter, even when these shots belong in the same series. Höfer is not, like the Bechers, strictly committed to a certain photographic procedure; she would rather try to find the most fitting and natural viewpoint for an interior, reluctant to create it artificially through elevated viewpoints or non-natural light arrangements. She tries to depict her subject matter in the most truthful and realistic way, avoiding too much subjective interference. Therefore she retains the documentary character of the photographic image, not as strictly as the Bechers, but, in contrast to Gursky, her images depict a natural viewpoint that could realistically be claimed by the spectator. This can be seen in her photograph '*Stadtbibliothek Stockholm*' (1993) (Plate 34), which depicts the interior of the public library in Stockholm, in particular the rotunda, a cylindrical two-storeyed building containing bookshelves and where on the ground level reading spaces, copying machines and the loan area can be found. This is the kind of subject matter that was also depicted by Andreas Gursky in an image from 1999 titled '*Bibliothek*' (Plate 35).<sup>508</sup> Höfer's photograph depicts a view from the first floor, capturing three levels of bookshelves, the white ceiling with its massive glass chandelier and the people on the ground floor who are reading, copying, speaking to a librarian or simply looking at books. In this image the spectator could claim Höfer's viewpoint should s/he ever visit Stockholm's library. Gursky, in contrast, depicted a digitally revised interior of the library consisting of three levels of bookshelves, a white ceiling without a chandelier and an erased ground level in exchange for a reflective surface of some sort mirroring the bookshelves from above. Whereas Höfer allowed the usual visitors of the library to remain in her photograph, Gursky has included only two visitors who can be spotted in front of bookshelves on different levels, appearing slightly lost in the middle of the ornamental pattern of colourful books.

Even though both Becher students photographed the same subject matter the result could not be more different. Gursky has depicted the essence of the public library by focusing on its most important content: books. His digitally constructed room depicts a colourful mass ornament consisting of book spines, and his choice of a large-scale format of 205x360 cm ensures his favoured even distribution of attention.<sup>509</sup> Gursky seems to focus on the overwhelming decorative structure and pattern in the library, whereas Höfer's photograph emphasizes the space more as a '*Lebensraum*'. Her

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<sup>508</sup> Gronert too compares Höfer's and Gursky's photographs of the public library in Stockholm, but more in regard to the effects of the use of different formats and the light arrangements. Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 28.

<sup>509</sup> See also Chapter II.

photograph depicts the subject matters in a pleasing way for the human eye, depicting architectural structures and pattern equally in comparison to the visitors and other details, for example the chandelier. Bearing in mind Höfer's training in Ole John's film and stage design class, the image feels like a sort of stage design. The spectator's eye is able to wander through the scene from an elevated position, and her/his view is guided by the different light sources in the room: a patch of sunlight on the left highlights a person walking on the first-floor balustrade, the chandelier leads the eye down to the ground level where two women are engaged in conversation, and the sun patch on the right near the staircase guides the eye to another staircase and doorway.<sup>510</sup> The spectator becomes a witness to a stationary moment, captured by Höfer, leaving us to guess what might happen next when everything swings back into motion.

In the 1990s, Höfer also began to depict clearly defined spaces, spaces designed not for public use but for public observation: animal enclosures in zoological gardens. Her series '*Zoologische Gärten*' (1993) fits neatly into her oeuvre and in this case, instead of preserving cultural knowledge, rare species are safeguarded – a fact that may explain why some animal enclosures appear in Höfer's photographs like exhibition rooms in a museum. The image '*Zoologischer Garten, London II*' (1992), for example, shows two lonely penguins walking around their futuristic outside enclosure with nicely designed round white walls. No humans can be seen; only some trees behind the wall which give an indication that these are two captive creatures in a zoo. These man-made 'natural' environments try to appeal to both the human visitors and the animal prisoners, so some images sometimes look somewhat comical; for example '*Zoologischer Garten, Paris II*' (1997) depicts a giraffe in its indoor enclosure. The walls of the enclosure are painted to represent trees, running ostriches and the endless expanse of the African savannah next to a huge door with metal bars. Höfer's zoological garden series concentrates not on the animal exhibits, but guides us to view the sometimes absurd architectural features and decorative arrangements. There are groups of penguins wandering through concrete blocks arranged like ice-floes ('*Zoologischer Garten, Köln II*' (1992)), a hippo walking on a terracotta-tiled floor next to fenced-in gum-trees ('*Zoologischer Garten, Basel II*' (1992)) and a lonely tiger with his huge front paws hanging on the edge of the swimming pool wall ('*Zoologischer Garten, Washington DC II*' (1992)).

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<sup>510</sup> Gronert also raises the issue about light effects in Höfer's photographs: Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert, 2009, 28-29.

Candida Höfer's dominant topics are interior spaces; in contrast to her teachers, it seems as if she is documenting them in a more incidental fashion. Instead of creating a neat symmetrical composition there are sometimes diagonal perspectives, but still there is always a portrait of the space. As in a stage design, Höfer is carefully on the look-out for the light to create the right atmosphere for her spaces, even though she never creates it artificially. Her photographs document deserted spaces in a clear and simple fashion, working with existing architectural structures and light sources and, in some cases, they leave the spectator to wonder when the play will begin.

Another Becher student who, like Höfer, is interested in public interiors and urban living spaces, is Thomas Struth, but, in contrast to Höfer, his photographs often depict the urban inhabitants as well. Struth's oeuvre consists of various genres: there are portraits, landscapes, flowers, jungle scenes, street photographs, museum interiors and depictions of machines. Struth, a friend of Gursky, whom he advised to apply to the Academy,<sup>511</sup> first studied painting with Peter Kleemann and Gerhard Richter between 1973 and 1976 before he started at the Becher class in 1976, exactly the same year that the Bechers first joined the Art Academy.<sup>512</sup> Struth had already worked with photography and applied to join Richter's class with a portfolio that made clear reference to the painter's own approach. Whereas Richter used photographs as a reference point for paintings, Struth reversed the approach and used his paintings as a basis for his photographs: his application portfolio comprised several architectural images, which he first painted and later photographed.

In 1976, his first year in the Bechers' class, Struth began to depict deserted cityscapes in black and white photographed mainly from a central perspective, thereby drawing the focus strongly onto the lines of the building. These compositions mirror the Bechers' systematic approach by using a centered viewpoint for the camera, which most of the time is slightly higher than the objects, an even distribution of light, and a perfectly sharp definition through a long exposure time. However, there is also another influence to be seen in these photographs, given that Struth's photographs originate from a time when the Bechers had already made the acquaintance of Stephen Shore, as mentioned earlier, and had introduced his work to their students. Struth, who later titled his series of street photography '*Unconscious Places*',<sup>513</sup> made a direct reference

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<sup>511</sup> Steinhauser/Derenthal (eds.) 2000, 126.

<sup>512</sup> Sommer (ed.) 2002, 109.

<sup>513</sup> Struth's first publication was titled '*Unconscious Places*' and was published in 1987 by the Kunsthalle Bern and Publishing House Walther König, depicting photographs made between 1976 and 1983: Steinhauser/Derenthal (eds.) 2000, 126.

to Shore's photographs of '*Uncommon Places*'.<sup>514</sup> Shore had started his series in 1973, exchanging his old 35 mm Rollei camera for a view camera after a conversation with the photography curator John Szarkowski.<sup>515</sup> Changing from a compact camera to a view camera impacted greatly on the subject matter. Shore was now in need of a tripod, given the long exposure times which exclude any moving objects; as Schmidt-Wulffen has put it: '*It is thus the camera that determines the elements in the images typical of Uncommon Places: few people, parked cars, and lots of architecture.*'<sup>516</sup> The use of the view camera erased '*the decisive moment*' but instated 'a documentary moment', describing the subject matter in an accurate and precise way, a depiction mode perfected by the Bechers.

In 1978, a stipend from the Academy to photograph in New York offered Struth the opportunity to apply the Becher method to typical subject matters associated with Shore.<sup>517</sup> Struth began to develop his interest in urban spaces and particularly in deserted street scenes: images like '*Crosby Street, New York*' (1978) depicting a deserted street scene and a parked car from a central perspective with clearly defined building lines subscribe on the one hand to the Bechers' documentary aim and on the other allow association in regard to composition and subject matter to Shore's street scenes. Even though Shore's photographs are in colour, a photograph depicting the '*View of Downtown Business District, Manistique, Michigan*' (1973) from Shore's diary bears a striking resemblance to Struth's image.<sup>518</sup> Struth, like Shore, was interested in unassuming subject matter, e.g. architecture with little tourist attraction or representative buildings, focusing on places that escape public attention in everyday life.

In the mid-1980s, Struth began to vary his subject matter and made more adjustments to the strict Becher concept: he worked with larger formats and, with the recent establishment of colour facilities at the Academy, photographed in colour and also varied the perspective in his photographs. Between 1984 and 1997 Struth became interested in portraits, which resulted in different series of single and family portraits in colour as well as in black and white. He seemed to have moved on from the documentation of the urban landscape in a modern industrial society to the examination of the inhabitants of such a landscape. While working on his portrait series

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<sup>514</sup> Shore's '*Uncommon Places*' were published in 1982: Tillman 2004, 177.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Schmidt-Wulffen 2004, 10.

<sup>517</sup> Sommer (ed.) 2002, 108.

<sup>518</sup> Tillman 2004, 179.

in 1987, he also began to depict interiors of churches and museums, a subject matter also familiar to Höfer, but unlike her, Struth did not exclude the visitors.<sup>519</sup>

Struth's museum photographs are not simply depictions of public interiors; these images convey another interpretative layer offering a correspondence between the depicted paintings, the photographed exhibition space with its visitors and us, the spectators of Struth's photograph. When Struth started his museum series in the early 1990s he made an intriguing discovery while in Madrid: *'I went to the Prado in Madrid and was flabbergasted by one particular painting, Las Meninas by Velázquez. It was so close to my interests. I thought: "Jesus Christ, why did nobody tell me about this?" and yet I never photographed it until 2005. I don't know why.'*<sup>520</sup> With this discovery Struth was in good artistic company: Velázquez's famous masterpiece has provided inspiration for a whole range of artists of different epochs: Manet,<sup>521</sup> Picasso,<sup>522</sup> Richard Hamilton,<sup>523</sup> Jeff Wall<sup>524</sup> and Sophie Matisse.<sup>525</sup> In *'Las Meninas'*, Velázquez depicts himself in his studio at the palace. While working on a painting of Philipp IV and Maria Anna of Austria, who can be seen only in the reflection of the mirror at the back wall, Velázquez is shown as being visited by the Infanta Margarita and her entourage. Velázquez highlights the production of his artwork which is now viewed by his 'audience', portraying the relationship between the artist, his audience and his work. Furthermore, he also indirectly raises issues about presentation and perception. In comparison, Struth's photographs of exhibition spaces focus on similar themes; his images not only document the presentation of the depicted artworks, but also focus on the visitors while they are viewing, sometimes maybe just consuming, the exhibits and, in regard to some facial expressions, how they perceive them.

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<sup>519</sup> Steinhauser/Derenthal (eds.) 2000, 126.

<sup>520</sup> Benedictus 2008.

<sup>521</sup> Manet's *'Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* (1882) is seen as an impressionistic interpretation of Velázquez's *'Las Meninas'* (1656): See Chapter III.

<sup>522</sup> Picasso, *'Las Meninas (After Velázquez)'* (1957), oil on canvas, Museo Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.

<sup>523</sup> Hamilton's etching was inspired by Picasso's version of *'Las Meninas'*. Richard Hamilton, *'Picasso's Meninas'* (1973), etching on paper, Tate Gallery London.

<sup>524</sup> Wall's *'Picture for Women'* (1979) is seen as a reference to Manet's *'Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* (1882), itself an impressionistic interpretation of Velázquez's *'Las Meninas'* (1656): See Chapter III.

<sup>525</sup> Henri Matisse's great-granddaughter Sophie painted as a deserted space the room which can be seen in Velázquez's *'Las Meninas'*. Sophie Matisse, *'Las Meninas'* (2001), oil on canvas.

In 2005, Struth started photographing Velázquez's *'Las Meninas'* at the Prado: *'When I went back to it, it marked a moment of evolution for me. I decided that I had to try something different: I had to stand inside the group of viewers, creating a greater intimacy between the people viewing the painting and those depicted in it.'*<sup>526</sup> Struth mounted his tripod on wheels to allow him to move more easily through the exhibition space, and became in this way highly visible to the visitors, with some even recognizing him.<sup>527</sup> Visitors gaze interestedly into his camera and are therefore looking out at the potential spectators of Struth's photographs, also making us aware of the artist's presence. Whereas in Velázquez's painting the Infanta Margarita and her entourage come to watch the painter and his painting, Struth's photographs depict the visitors who originally came to see the exhibits, but by chance, especially when they directly look at him, they begin to observe Struth at work. In both cases, the visitors become the actual subject matter, while the artwork for which they came can either not be seen, as in Velázquez's case, or is not the centre of attention, as in Struth's. Struth's photograph *'Las Meninas by Velázquez (Prado)'* (2005) (Plate 36) makes strong reference to the famous painting, depicting not only the visitors but also the original painting by Velázquez in the background. Struth, the only trained painter in the Becher class, takes up elements of the pictorial concept used in Velázquez's painted composition in his photographic composition, inevitably connecting the two genres. Velázquez's painting already questions the relationship and interaction the spectators have with the depicted figures; Struth photographed visitors looking at Velázquez's figures, while they look out at them and are watched by us, in a series of interacting gazes which add another layer to these interferences of depicted visual spaces.

In his earlier series, Struth had examined the environment and human beings separately, moving on to analyse humans in public spaces, for example with his museum group, as well as photographing portraits, landscapes and flowers, often working on different subject matters at the same time. His interest in such a variety of themes is reflected in a more personalized work approach than that of his teachers. He included non-static scenes in his oeuvre and changed to larger-scale formats and colour photography, slowly freeing himself from his teachers' influence.

Struth's fellow student, Axel Hütte, has freed himself from his teachers' approach, so much so that the art historian Rudolf Schmitz announced that his photographs are characterized by *'le concept de l'objectivité hallucinatoire'*.<sup>528</sup> His photographs

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<sup>526</sup> Benedictus 2008.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Schmitz 2008.



sometimes appear as optical delusions of objectivity; this is apparent in '*Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin*' (2001) (Plate 37), which belongs to a series of images depicting exteriors and interiors by night. This photograph depicts, as the title announces, the New National Gallery at the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin built by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1968. The night view of the museum creates a complex composition based on the existing lights and their reflections. The building lines, the light from the ceiling and its reflection on the ground, all seem to converge in a central vanishing point. Immediately the question arises as to whether the vanishing point lies inside or outside the portrayed building. The composition can be split horizontally into two similarly sized halves: the lower half depicts the granite terrace and the upper half the building. The granite terrace, covered with puddles of water and dampness that reflect the interior ceiling light of the building, gives the needed indication that one is looking at an exterior view. The '*Neue Nationalgalerie*' is a rectangular pavilion made of steel-framed glass walls with a roof carried on two steel columns on each side giving the impression of a nearly transparent building. The ceiling lights and their reflection travel unhindered through the glass walls of the building, making it difficult at first to locate the borders between the interior and exterior. But while the eye is getting used to such an unfamiliar darkened view it locates several of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chairs behind the glass, which also confirm that Hütte's view camera was placed outside, on the terrace. The photograph is the depiction of an existing architecture, a fact that still is rooted in the Becher documentary tradition; however, as Schmitz has pointed out,<sup>529</sup> Hütte explores the limits of such a documentary tradition. He remains faithful to the actual object in front of his camera, but he also allows elements in his photographs to deviate from their documentary status. In the case of '*Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin*' (2001) the night composition makes the building almost unrecognizable; this is reinforced through the used perspective that places the granite terrace in such a prominent spot, leaving it to take up half of the pictorial space, equal in rank with the building.

Hütte, who, parallel to his attendance at the Bechers' class studied sociology at the University in Cologne, was registered with the Düsseldorf Art Academy between 1973 and 1981.<sup>530</sup> While studying at the Bechers' class, Hütte twice began to shoot portrait series in 1978 and 1980<sup>531</sup> and started another series between 1984 and 1988. However, as Gronert has pointed out, Hütte's portrait series were never properly

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Steinhauser/Derenthal (eds.) 2000, 124.

<sup>531</sup> Pfab 2001, 32; Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 29-30.

recognized; instead Thomas Ruff, as we will see below, became famous for his.<sup>532</sup> Hütte later began to concentrate on different themes: he photographed, in black and white, deserted spaces dominated by clear structures mostly in cities; these spaces included hallways, tube stations, underground car parks and bridges. In 1982, he was awarded a DAAD<sup>533</sup> scholarship to London, resulting in black and white series of doorways of the Brandon Estate in London. These images are still based on the Bechers' pure documentary approach, and depict a certain architectural *tristesse* of stairways, corridors and landings without being too atmospheric and softened in any way.<sup>534</sup> In the 1990s, Hütte began to photograph landscapes; some of these images also depict parts of a building like for example '*Vescona II*' (1991). The image is dominated by two huge concrete pillars that support the roof of a barn. The architectural construction provides parts of the landscape in the background with a confined frame and interrupts an unhindered view onto a hilly green Italian landscape with a barely visible farmhouse in the far distance and a few trees which mark the horizon. The barn roof and pillars determine the way the panoramic landscape can be viewed.

Hütte's photographs are carefully constructed. He is not only interested in a simple depiction of his subject matter; he also examines the influences of his chosen angle on his depicted object. His aim is to choose a certain point of view in order to influence the perception of the spectator, hoping that s/he is able to recognize the indexical sign behind the simple photographic portrayal.<sup>535</sup> This explains why Hütte, unlike Gursky, rarely uses an overall view for his subject matter; instead he often depicts sections of his objects. Furthermore, Hütte has remarked that he is not interested in simple pictorial reproduction; he believes an image should convey a secret.<sup>536</sup> His photographs offer a depiction of reality but one found outside the strict boundaries of the Becher method; he sacrifices documentary elements for a personalized view of his depicted object – something the Bechers had always rejected in their own work. However, Hütte is still interested, like his teachers, in a precise depiction of his objects. Like several other Becher students, he uses a view camera with a tripod in order to

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<sup>532</sup> Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 29-30.

<sup>533</sup> Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst/German Academic Exchange Service.

<sup>534</sup> An earlier example of such a documentary approach can be seen in the photographs of Eugène Atget (1857-1927) who documented Parisian architecture, including stairways, corridors, facades and doors.

<sup>535</sup> Schneede 1993, 11.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

exclude any distortion or blurring. He too works with a serial approach and largely uses similar conditions to photograph his objects in order to allow comparisons within the series. The aim of Bernd and Hilla Becher was to depict reality as truthfully as they could with their strict concept, whereas Hütte uses reality as a basis for his images. In many ways he is like Gursky in this respect; particularly so in view of his interest in the possibilities of using subject matters to produce pictorial ideas which often offer a seeming objectivity to the spectator.<sup>537</sup>

#### **4. Thomas Ruff: Explorer of Photographic Structures**

The only Becher student to work with digital techniques and computer programs other than Gursky is Thomas Ruff. He studied between 1977 and 1985 at the Academy and is best known for his experimental approach towards photographic and pictorial technologies through which he examines different aspects of the photographic medium. He started to work on different subject matters and shifted from black and white to colour photography; like Gursky, he began to distance himself from the strict concept of his teachers. Ruff explored his subject matter through different photographic and pictorial techniques. He took analogue photographs, used existing and already published photographs from different sources, for example originating from newspaper cuttings ('*Newspaper Photos*' (1990-91)), scientific images of night skies from the European Southern Observatory ('*Stars*' series (1990)),<sup>538</sup> or from internet sources for his series '*Nudes*' (2001-05). He also experimented with various technologies, like infrared lenses for the series '*Night Skies*' (1989), stereoscopy images for his series '*Stereo Photographs*' (1994-96),<sup>539</sup> and a composite-image-camera for '*Other Portraits*' (1994).<sup>540</sup> In 1989, Ruff started to work with digital techniques, three years earlier than Gursky. At first, he used them only to remove obstructions in his buildings series.<sup>541</sup> Later, he constructed images with computer programs, as in '*Substrate*' (2003),<sup>542</sup> or digitally processed and obscured images, as in '*Nudes*' (2001-05).<sup>543</sup> Ruff's approach

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>538</sup> For a plate of the '*Stars*' series see: Sommer (ed.) 2002, 83.

<sup>539</sup> For night images and images of stereoscopy see: Urban 2000; Sommer (ed.) 2002, 84-85.

<sup>540</sup> For plates see: Ruff (ed.) 1995; Sommer (ed.) 2002, 80-81.

<sup>541</sup> Claser 2000; Cosar 1994.

<sup>542</sup> Ruff (ed.) 2003b.

<sup>543</sup> Ruff (ed.) 2003a.

towards the photographic medium challenges our conventional understanding of what a photograph represents and how it is perceived.

Photographers like Ruff, Gursky and Wall seem to have been influenced more by the role of art than by photography itself. Ruff and Gursky belonged to the first generation who studied photography as a subject at a German Art Academy. In an interview, Ruff remarked about his choice: *'When I started at the Kunstakademie in 1977, I was an amateur. I took photographs like the ones you find in amateur magazines. I wanted to travel around the world taking beautiful photographs of beautiful landscapes and people. I thought that the most beautiful pictures were made at art academies, so I applied there. At that time Düsseldorf was the only art academy in Germany with a photography class. I applied with my twenty most beautiful slides, and strangely enough Bernd [Becher] took me.'*<sup>544</sup> Ruff recalled about his time at the Academy: *'The friends I made at the art academy were painters and sculptors. I started to look at art and realized my idea of images was the kitsch thing.'*<sup>545</sup> Ruff therefore decided to revive markedly fine-arts genre for his first photographic series: the portrait, a theme that would occupy him for a decade between 1981 and 1991.<sup>546</sup> However, choosing this genre did not mean in any way that Ruff would stick to a traditional form of composition for his portrait series. The photographic portrait had already emancipated itself from its painterly predecessor. At first, photographic portraits were mostly staged and carefully composed in a studio. Whereas studio photography tried to avoid distractions to capture the true, but sometimes constructed, likeness of the sitter, Pictorialist portrait photography tried to achieve the opposite: the appearance of the portrait should imitate that of a painting and the sitter should be captured in his/her individual environment to highlight his/her personality.<sup>547</sup> However, Ruff had something different in mind and his initial decision for a portrait series was influenced by the circumstances in Germany at the time, as he remarked in an interview with Gil Blank: *'When I started with the portraits, it was with the awareness that we were living at the end of the twentieth century, in an industrialized Western country. [...] Surveillance cameras were everywhere, and you were being watched all the time. When I started making the portraits in 1981, my friends and I were very curious about what might*

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<sup>544</sup> Goldberg 2005.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> 1981-85 he worked on a series of small-scale portraits; 1986-91 on one of large-scale portraits.

<sup>547</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 9, 243-244; Eskilden (ed.) 2008, 9-10.

*happen in 1984, Orwell's year. Would this idea come to fruition?*<sup>548</sup> For Ruff, as he points out in the interview, Orwell's world had come to life in a German state that had been battling with the Red Army Faction since the end 1960s. Ruff, who was born in 1958, recalls how he felt during the end of the 1970s and 1980s, when the German state remained on constant terror alert: *'They [RAF] plotted – and in some cases carried out – assassinations of politicians and industry leaders, were captured and then died under suspicious circumstances while in government custody. So the police were very nervous; there were a lot of controls placed on daily life, and we were often required to produce our passports for inspections.'*<sup>549</sup> Even though the RAF founding members Andreas Baader and Gudrun Enslin had apparently committed suicide in their cells in 1977,<sup>550</sup> the terror continued and Germany witnessed more murders throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>551</sup> Before the RAF declared its dissolution in 1998, Germany's youth was under surveillance, as the founding members of the RAF had already been succeeded by a second and third generation.

In 1981, Ruff made his first attempt to shoot portraits of forty of his friends, as he explained: *'My idea for the portraits was to use a very even light in combination with a large-format camera, so that you could see everything about the sitter's face. I didn't want to hide anything. Yet I also didn't want the people I portrayed to show any emotion. I told them to look into the camera with self-confidence, but likewise, that they should be conscious of the fact that they were being photographed, that they were looking into a camera.'*<sup>552</sup> Ruff explained further that it was his aim *'to do a kind of official portrait of his generation'* and that he set out to make his portrait series look like official photographs in passports but without the additional personal information normally held by such an identity document: *'I didn't want the police/viewer to get any information about us.'*<sup>553</sup> Ruff arranged the sitters in a studio in front of coloured cards, depicting them from head to shoulder, sometimes *en face*, sometimes in classical

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<sup>548</sup> Blank 2005.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Gerhard Richter's fifteen paintings *'18.Oktober 1977'* (1988) depict four members of the RAF.

<sup>551</sup> Biesenbach (ed.) 2005. In 1986 Gerold von Braunmühl, a Foreign Ministry diplomat, was murdered in Bonn. In 1989 Alfred Herrhausen, the chief executive of Deutsche Bank, was murdered in Bad Homburg. In 1991 Detlev K. Rohwedder, the president of the *'Treuhand'* (Post-Unification Privatization Agency), was shot in Düsseldorf. On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1998 the RAF declared its dissolution.

<sup>552</sup> Blank 2005.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

profile or as a three-quarter profile in the tradition of studio photography. The images had conventional measurements of 24 cm by 18 cm, and were later arranged in four rows of ten.

Inevitably, the images resembled those of passport photographs or mug shots. In the tradition of the Bechers' strict concept of serial photography, Ruff composed a typology of portraits with standardized rules for light, perspective and location for every picture to enable a comparative view on a series with similar subject matter. This he achieved even though he disregarded the Bechers' rejection of colour photographs and chose to vary the position of his sitters in his series, which seems to refer to particular operative categories of portrait painting. It could be said that the depiction of the sitter in strict classical profile has its origins in paintings of the Italian Renaissance, especially in donor portraits, whereas the three-quarter profile is often found in religious and historical painting of the same period. The three-quarter profile was modelled on funerary sculptures and other statues to achieve a certain depth in the painting, an effect which can also be discerned in Ruff's photographs.<sup>554</sup>

Ruff's models are depicted in a distanced and neutral way: they do not display any facial emotion and often their positioning in the composition seems not to be to their advantage. Ruff's series of portraits shows certain elements of objectivity and distance which can be found in straight photography. The images are arranged so as to be perceived as a comparable series in the Becher tradition, but also make references to the painted portrait and former studio photography. In addition, Ruff also succeeded in his aim to produce a contemporary portrait series that would prominently focus on the individual facial features of his friends without revealing anything about them as individuals or about their identities.

From 1986 to 1991, Ruff shot another series of portraits; with the financial help of the Nelson Gallery in Villeurbanne, he enlarged five images to measurements of between 210 cm x 165 cm and 240 cm x 180 cm (Plate 38).<sup>555</sup> These large-scale photographs brought Ruff international recognition and caused such an excitement in the Becher class that several other students, like Struth, Hütte and Gursky, also started to enlarge their images.<sup>556</sup> The technology to print over-sized images had just become available and brought about a change in perception for these photographs. Suddenly,

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<sup>554</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 2, 174-175; Wundram 1995.

<sup>555</sup> Index to Artists and Works, in: Eskilden (ed.) 2008; Galassi 2003, 17; Schirmer (ed.)/Gronert 2009, 44.

<sup>556</sup> Galassi 2003, 17.

they could claim their place next to paintings at galleries and museums and compete with their presence.

Ruff worked with a view camera and depicted the sitters *en face* in half-length portraits; their position and the colour of the background did not vary. The view camera allowed him to achieve a distinct sharpness of his objects, despite the fact that he enlarged the images to the above measurements. The depiction of the sitters was three times bigger than their real size. The images were presented as chromogenic prints (C-prints) behind acrylic glass, a presentation form often used by the advertising industry, which gave them a particularly radiant surface. The shift from small-scale to large-scale images influenced the perception of the subject matter, an effect which can also be seen in Gursky's images. Half of the photograph depicts the face and the other half the neck, shoulders and breast. From a distance, the spectator can concentrate on the overall half-length portrait and by coming closer can experience the details of the facial features, like a human landscape which occupies the whole photographic surface.

The depiction of the sitters *en face* refers to an art-historical source and is traditionally linked to Albrecht Dürer and his self-portrait '*Selbstbildnis im Pelzrock*' from 1500 (Plate 39), a strict symmetrical *en face* depiction as a half-length portrait.<sup>557</sup> Its iconography refers to *vera icon* ('true portrait') depictions of Christ; the proportions in the picture also find their origins in Christ's depictions from the mediaeval period.<sup>558</sup> Dürer's self-portrait represents the idea of the Renaissance that the human being is a likeness of God and his immortality. In that sense, the image has a memorial character, showing the sitter how he would be remembered and remain in the world.<sup>559</sup> Nowadays the *en face* depiction in a portrait is found in commercial images and in the form of passport or identity photography, which to some extent preserves parts of the memorial character of the images.

The main characteristic of these large-scale portraits by Ruff is the isolation of the sitters in front of a neutral background, the *en face* depiction and their enlargement to oversized images. Through the combination of these elements, Ruff has created an unnatural presence for the sitter. Given the enormous enlargement, the images rather seem to be more of a form of representational construction than an authentic depiction of the sitter focusing on his individual characteristics. In Ruff's view, a portrait cannot be more than a form of documentary: '*If you look at a portrait of a person, it can't give*

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<sup>557</sup> Walther (ed.) 1995, Vol. 1, 187. In 2000, Struth photographed Dürer's self portrait and included himself on the right side of the frame with his back to the camera.

<sup>558</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 4, 107.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., Vol. 2, 174-175; Wundram 1995; Read (ed.), 1997, 170-172.

*you any information about the life of the sitter, like, is he going to have a visit from his mother in two hours? So what kind of information can a photograph deliver? I have no idea of what kind of information a portrait can convey. I think the possibilities of a photographic portrait are very limited. If there are photographers who say their portraits give more information than mine, I say they only pretend.*<sup>560</sup> Ruff's large-scale portraits portray everything in detail about the face of the sitter, but not unlike his first series, reveal absolutely nothing about the person.

Between 1962 and 1967, Gerhard Richter also worked with the portrait genre. He used photographs from different sources, like magazines, newspapers and amateur images. He made portraits of relatives, celebrities, criminals, murder victims and other persons he found in the press.<sup>561</sup> His portrait series of '*Eight Student Nurses*' who were murdered in Chicago in 1966 show the women in three-quarter profile.<sup>562</sup> The original images, possibly passport pictures taken from the nurses' school yearbook, were used by magazines to cover the news stories about the murder. Richter enlarged the images, which considerably blurred the photographs, an effect which he then imitated through his painting technique. Richter wrote: '*The caption of the source image, a newspaper clipping, reads: The police of Chicago searches frantically for the mass murderer, who, for unknown reasons, brutishly killed eight student nurses in a dormitory on Thursday (our picture shows the victims from the left: Gloria Davy, Merlita Gargullo, Valentina Pasion, Suzanne Farris; below: Patricia Matusek, Mary Ann Jordan, Nina Schmale and Pamela Wilkening). A ninth nurse was able to hide and later call the police.*'<sup>563</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1966 Richard Speck broke into the dormitory of the nurses' school in Chicago in order to burgle the property. He changed his plan when he discovered that the nurses were in the building. He held them hostage and raped, stabbed and murdered them, except for Corazon Amurao, who hid under a bed during the killing and later identified Speck.<sup>564</sup>

When Richter began work on the portrait series of the nurses he had finished two earlier works whose overarching theme was murder. His interest in public imagery depicting murder, crime and death was shared by Andy Warhol. In 1962 Warhol's

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<sup>560</sup> Goldberg 2005.

<sup>561</sup> Richter has published his collected photographs, photographic sources, drawings and collages in: Richter (ed.) 1997.

<sup>562</sup> '*Acht Lernschwestern*' (1966), oil on canvas, each 95x75 cm, Private Collection, Zürich, Switzerland. Plates can be seen at: Richter Online Archive n.d.a.

<sup>563</sup> Richter Online Archive n.d.b.

<sup>564</sup> Kolchak 2006; Lohr 2003; Chua-Eoan 2007.



friend Henry Geldzahler drew his attention to the front page of the New York Mirror of 4<sup>th</sup> July displaying the image of a plane crash. Warhol painted the newspaper photograph without its headline while projecting it as a transparency onto his canvas. Warhol's painting '129 Die' (1962) became the starting point for his preoccupation with death and disaster: images of road accidents, race riots, suicides, the electric chair and his series about the bereaved Jackie Kennedy.<sup>565</sup> In 1964, Richter completed the image 'Frau mit Schirm' (Woman with Umbrella) depicting Jacky Kennedy after the assassination of her husband holding her hand over her mouth in disbelief; in 1966, he painted 'Helga Matura', a murdered prostitute whose case got intensive press coverage at the time in Germany. Richter noted: 'The caption of the source image, a clipping from Revue magazine from 16<sup>th</sup> March 1966, reads: *Ermordete Lebedame: Helga Matura (Murdered good-time girl: Helga Matura). She was murdered by a person unknown on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1966.*'<sup>566</sup> The painting depicts the young woman sitting in what appears to be a field, wearing a white dress and smiling happily directly into the camera.

Richter's portraits are not a form of documentary. Even though they are modelled on photographs, they give a limited amount of information about the sitter, just as Ruff had predicted for the genre. Like Warhol, Richter appropriated newspaper photographs for his artwork leaving the context of or, if existent, the headlines for those images unknown. Richter depicts Jackie Kennedy and Helga Matura without any hint as to their wider circumstances, thereby excluding any sort of obvious tragic element. In his series of the student nurses, their heads and faces dominate the whole image and appear like masks, somewhat anonymous because of the considerable blurring of the portraits caused by their enlargement and the painting process. Richter's series of portraits do not show individual features or characteristics; instead they are more a kind of typology<sup>567</sup> which documents eight quite similar female faces and questions whether it is possible to capture reality truthfully. For Richter's work, photography is no longer only a tool for painting; it has become the basis for some of his paintings and his methodological approach is aimed at questioning our perception of reality.

Like Richter, Ruff is not only interested in the photographic depiction of his subject matters; he is also intrigued by the way in which his images are perceived and by the effects a certain depiction can cause. Ruff also has worked with photographic images from different sources, i.e. newspaper cuttings and scientific images. Paradoxically,

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<sup>565</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 12, 225-227.

<sup>566</sup> Richter Online Archive n.d.c.

<sup>567</sup> A typology similar to the approach used by the Bechers' and Sander.

Ruff can be seen to be working as a photographer although he himself did not take the original shots. From 1981 to 1991, he collected 2,500 newspaper cuttings from German newspapers and used about 400 of these images for his series 'Newspaper Photos' (1990-91). Ruff deleted the titles and subtitles of these photographs and then re-photographed and enlarged them. Ruff said about the series: *'Maybe by that time I already became slightly theoretical. I was interested in what happens when you take away a text from an image printed in a newspaper to illustrate the text. How much information will remain? Some scenes can't be connected any more to anything; they've lost all information. But they keep their visual aesthetic.'*<sup>568</sup> This form of presentation does not divulge the origins of the images. They have to be perceived without any context, like a photographic ready-made. In this sense, Ruff is questioning the informative and documentary character of these images and is focusing primarily on their visual appearance.

Ruff's interest in pictorial techniques led him to explore another form of analogue photography in his series 'Other Portraits' (1994), in which he used the Minolta montage machine which generated images for the German criminal investigation services in the 1970s. The machine creates, revises or ages facial features of suspects or missing persons and has primarily been used to produce phantom images. The machine amalgamated two portraits into one which Ruff then photographed and used as a model for his screen print or serigraph.<sup>569</sup> Ruff described his intention for his series 'Other Portraits' (1994) as follows: *'When I started them, I wanted to reconstruct one of my portraits. Some critics wrote about my portraits that they were anti-individualistic and anonymous. I wanted to prove that the people depicted in my portraits are unique. It was important to me to make the "Andere Porträts" in an analogue way. I used a kit that the police use to build mug shots. I realized that I couldn't reconstruct one of my portraits by matching parts [of the face]. But as I had the possibility to work with this kit, I said, "Okay, let's do new faces that do not exist, in an analogue, old-fashioned way." I was altering photographic images but in an old-fashioned way. There's been such a lot of manipulation since the early days of photography; it didn't start with the tool Photoshop.'*<sup>570</sup> Ruff's composite images resulted in human faces, obviously of non-existent people, with an artificial and aloof appearance which questions the perception of facial features and how they are read. Perhaps the origins of composite photography can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The racial anthropologist and eugenicist Francis

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<sup>568</sup> Goldberg 2005.

<sup>569</sup> Ruff 1995.

<sup>570</sup> Goldberg 2005.

Galton used composite photography to verify and illustrate his study of heredity. He took numerous portraits of a certain group of people and exposed them on one photographic plate, then merged their individual facial features into one in order to show the common characteristics of this group. His idea was to create certain typological ranges of humans and their appearance was meant to refer to their character and potential.<sup>571</sup>

Ruff's portrait series puts a strong emphasis on the human face, the most prominent part of our appearance, which depends on a unique genetic composition, a fact that brought him into the spotlight of making 'Fascist art', as he explained: '*At the end of the eighties, a French critic alleged that my portraits – probably because they were so big – were either Fascistic art or Socialist Realism. He couldn't decide, but in any case, being compared as a German artist to the Fascists made me very upset. I decided in response to co-opt the cliché of Aryan art: portraits with blue eyes.*'<sup>572</sup> Ruff used six male and six female portraits for his series '*Blaue Augen*' ('Blue Eyes') (1991) and revised the irises of these portraits, changing them into bright blue. The result surprised Ruff, as he remarked: '*They didn't remind me of ugly theories from the 1930s, but more of discussions we have today – like genetic engineering – because the faces looked contemporary.*'<sup>573</sup>

With the burgeoning of digital technology in the 1980s, it was not only Ruff who worked with composite photographs in an artistic way. Other artists, like Nancy Burson, used composite photographs as well, even though they were by then computer-generated. This simplified the work process of merging the faces of film stars in her '*Beauty Composites*' from 1982. In the first composite photograph, she used Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe, and in the second composite image she amalgamated Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep.<sup>574</sup> Burson's work in the early 1980s was felt to question '*the standards of beauty*' by amalgamating certain faces and facial features.<sup>575</sup>

Ruff's series '*Other Portraits*' (1994) challenges the nature of the portrait as an artistic genre, yet, at the same time, documents the unlimited possibilities of the photographic medium as a pictorial technique. For his invented and constructed subject

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<sup>571</sup> Frizot 1998c.

<sup>572</sup> Blank 2005.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Paul 2003.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

matter, Ruff combined composite photographs with serigraphs in a serial approach. This interest in different pictorial techniques, photographic concepts, artistic approaches and methods of execution led to another work group: his series '*Posters*' (1996–ongoing). Once again, he uses existing photographic images for his digitally altered poster-collages.<sup>576</sup> Ruff combined his interests in political developments in Europe and Germany during the 1990s with the political poster genre, especially the work of the founder of political photomontage and figurehead of the Dada movement in Berlin, John Heartfield (a.k.a. Helmut Herzfeld).<sup>577</sup> Ruff used existing photographs which he then digitally 'cut and pasted' to create new images.<sup>578</sup> The manifest content of these digital collages relates to political themes, for example the deportation of asylum seekers in Germany in the mid-1990s in his image '*Poster IV (Housing Authority)*' (1997).<sup>579</sup>

The main difference between Ruff's and Heartfield's posters is that the political intention and criticism is ambiguous in the case of the former, at least at first sight. For example, Ruff sometimes uses Chinese characters and Cyrillic letters and mirror-images of certain letters, so that the subject matters appear mysterious and are not easily identifiable for the spectator. Ruff questions the photographic sources with his digitally transformed political posters and reminds the viewer that political messages can be ambiguous and difficult to decipher.

For his series '*Nudes*' (2001-05), Ruff used so-called thumbnails of pornographic images on the internet. These are a form of small-scale preview of what can be downloaded in larger formats. He then enlarged these miniature images digitally to panel-image format. Because of their low resolution, the enlarged image was blurred to such an extent that one could only get a sense about the content of the subject matter and its origins.<sup>580</sup> This effect happened more or less by accident to Ruff, as he points out: '*I wanted to make the pictures a kind of parlor size: 80x140 cm or 100x140 cm. If you enlarge a digital image just by calculating the pixels up, you get a very ugly structure. If you enlarge and shift the pixels to the right or the left, it's cut into four, nine,*

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<sup>576</sup> Index to Artists and Works, in: Eskilden (ed.) 2008.

<sup>577</sup> Pachnicke/Honnef (eds.) 1991. Ruff's interest in Dada and John Heartfield was shared by Wall. See Chapter III.

<sup>578</sup> The technique of digital cutting and pasting has also been used by Gursky, e.g. in his image '*Kathedrale I*' (2007). The only difference is that Gursky used his own photographs for the digital collage: See Chapter II.

<sup>579</sup> Plate can be seen at: Santa Barbara Art, Design & Architecture Museum n.d.

<sup>580</sup> Ruff (ed.) 2003a.

*or sixteen parts. The change happens by chance. I was experimenting at the time with pixels and didn't have this kind of photography in mind. I was playing around. I applied it with one of those porn photographs and had this very strange, beautiful, and at the same time awful image.*<sup>581</sup>

The blurred effect provides the images with elements more associated with Impressionism. Asked whether he used the Impressionistic elements intentionally, Ruff replied: *'I must confess I didn't think about Impressionism but about the whole history of nude painting. What I wanted to do with the nudes was to create photographic images of nudes, but in a contemporary way.'*<sup>582</sup>

There is also a certain resemblance to Richter's work; for example to his painting *'Ema – Nude on a Staircase'* (1966) (Plate 48). Since the 1960s, Richter has worked more and more with images from different sources: graphics, paintings and photographs from advertisements, books and magazines, and, since 1969, his own photographs.<sup>583</sup> With this material he produced his photo-paintings, first only in blurred grey tones and since 1966 also in colour. Like Ruff, Richter took these images out of context and isolated the subject matter through his particular artistic approach to question the depicted object, their source and perception.

In Ruff's work the original information that related to a photographic image is in some sense neutralized, because his photographs are without context, there are no sub-titles, no explanations; sometimes these images even lack sharp definition or realistic proportions. More relevant than the context and composition seems to be the fact that the spectator examines what s/he thinks s/he sees and what s/he associates with the content of the photographic surface. It is up to the recipient to question the origins, the objectivity and the truthfulness of the image. For Ruff, the objectivity of his photographic medium is of no concern. Referring to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement and photographers like August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch, Ruff pointed out: *'The difference between them and me is that they believed [themselves] to have captured reality and I believe [myself] to have created a picture',*<sup>584</sup> a belief shared by his fellow students, bearing in mind their artistic development over the years. Ruff also admits: *'Most of the photos we come across today aren't really authentic [any more] –*

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<sup>581</sup> Goldberg 2005.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

<sup>583</sup> Over 40 years Richter created drawings and diagrams and also collected newspaper clippings as well as 5000 photographs for his *'Atlas'* which he uses as source material for his work. Friedel 2007.

<sup>584</sup> Pocock n.d.

*they have the authenticity of a manipulated and prearranged reality. You have to know the conditions of a particular photograph in order to understand it properly because the camera just [copies] what is in front of it.*<sup>585</sup> Ruff has no difficulty in freely discussing with critics, writers and audiences the production process of his images and the use of all sorts of technical devices, digital techniques or other technologies available and useful for his work. This allows the recipient to view Ruff's images in a more informed and reflective fashion and enables him to access these '*arranged realities*'.

For Ruff, who grew up when television, film, photography and magazines were already established media relying on pictorial representation, it was only logical for him to work with photography in his career as an artist, because in his view '*you don't have to paint to be an artist*'.<sup>586</sup> Ruff's photographic images challenge, in one way or another, the idea that they represent real subject matters, although this is an inevitable problem which comes with his medium of choice. Ruff is not interested in the deeper meaning of his objects. He is interested in creating, with different techniques and technical devices, a surface that looks like a photograph. To make sense of the deeper meaning is up to the recipients of the image. Ruff has produced portraits which remind us of passport photographs; interiors in the tradition of straight photography; landscapes that seem to refer to mass-produced tourist postcards; and blurred internet thumbnails with a reminiscence of Photo-Realism. In all these different categories we find structures, forms and techniques that belong to the genre of documentary photography, but which exist only to create something original. Ruff often selects and uses pre-existing photographs out of the daily flood of imagery that surrounds us, for example scientific images<sup>587</sup> or newspaper cuttings.<sup>588</sup> In this way, he works in a similar fashion to Richter: he uses these existing photographs as a trigger to create something new or as a basis, like a canvas, for his own pictorial statement. Ruff's main aim, like Richter's, seems to be to discover what lies beyond the representational surface of the photographic image. Ruff's series '*Substrate*' can be seen as an example of his desire to examine the surface of photography. In 2003, he made this series of computer-generated abstract colour compositions which originated from Japanese comics.<sup>589</sup> Asked in an interview why he used *mangas*, Ruff said: '*Again, that was very pragmatic. I needed*

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid.

<sup>587</sup> He used scientific images of night skies by the European Southern Observatory for his series '*Stars*' (1990).

<sup>588</sup> He used newspaper cuttings for his series '*Newspaper Photos*' (1990-91).

<sup>589</sup> Ruff (ed.) 2003b.

*hard-edged colors, green beside red beside blue, as photographs are too smooth in color and graduation. For what I intended, I tried one substrate with different Alex Katz paintings. It worked, but the colors were not as intensive as the manga.*<sup>590</sup> Ruff used the *mangas* literally as a substratum, a foundation or basis for his photograph; his interest is in the effects he can create on a photographic surface which, in this case, creates associations to abstract paintings.

Since 2004, Ruff has been working on his 'Jpeg' photographs, named after a compression process to reduce the size of data for computer files or images. Through the compression process the file or image will lose a barely definable amount of data, which is not really of concern because these images are small and do not exceed a certain data size. Ruff is interested in the aspects and effects of the compression process. Through the process of extreme enlargement the amount of information lost can be seen in the rough digital grid, the extreme colours and the light effects of the image. In this sense the compression process separates the representation of the image from its original content. The existing image is not related any longer to its origins; its surface exists because of a computer-generated process, which is open to projection and speculation by the recipient. The 'Jpeg' series offers interesting pictorial surfaces: from close up, one can see nothing but pixels, from a reasonable distance one can recognize the subject matter and from far away the content becomes blurred and is reduced to guesswork.<sup>591</sup>

Ruff continues to explore the genre of abstract forms. His latest series, 'Zycles' (2008), depicts wildly curved coloured lines printed with an inkjet printer onto a large-scale canvas.<sup>592</sup> He modelled these images on illustrations of magnetic fields on copperplates which he found in 19<sup>th</sup>-century books about electro-magnetism and then used a three-dimensional program to transform the illustration into linear structures. He worked with a selection of different parts of these structures to create his images, which have a specific resemblance to Informal and Cubist paintings. It is perhaps therefore no surprise that some press reports from the time of the 39<sup>th</sup> Art Fair in Basel refer to them as '*paintings by the photographer Thomas Ruff*'.<sup>593</sup> In this work, Ruff plays with the appearance of photographic surfaces; the photographic image now has a canvas surface, a totally different texture to what the recipient would expect. Gursky, by

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<sup>590</sup> Goldberg 2005.

<sup>591</sup> Mai 36 Galerie n.d.

<sup>592</sup> Robinson 2008.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid. Robinson wrote: '*Still one more surprise comes from photographer Thomas Ruff, who presents a gallery full of new paintings – they look like paintings, anyway – called Zycles.*'

contrast, in comparison, is keen on preserving the photographic surface by all means. His images 'Untitled XVI' (2008) and 'Untitled XV' (2008) are in the main generated by architectural software, but their appearance do not reveal their genesis in any way. Ruff, like Gursky, has distinguished himself from his fellow students and his teachers through his experimental use of different technologies, technical devices and his work with pre-existing photographs by utilizing them to create new photographic images.

### **5. Ian Wallace: Mentoring Jeff Wall**

Wall's biography often appears to be rather short of information about his career, academic environment, supervisor, influential mentors or teachers, in particular when compared to the Becher students. Ian Wallace is occasionally mentioned as Wall's mentor or instructor and also seems to have been a long-standing friend of Wall since the late 1960s.<sup>594</sup> In 1968, the twenty-four-year-old Wallace had just finished his MA at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and had begun to teach at the same institution. It was here that he met Wall, who was twenty-one at the time and keen to do an MA in art history, which was then supervised by Wallace.<sup>595</sup> Wallace worked simultaneously on his art projects while teaching at UBC and the Vancouver Art School (now the Emily Carr University of Art and Design) until 1998, during which time he also published critical essays and reviews on film, literature and the visual arts.<sup>596</sup> Wallace introduced the 'Art Now' course to the students' curriculum, a course that was attended for example by Roy Arden and Stan Douglas. Arden, who studied at the Vancouver Art School in 1977, recalled about the time: *'The photography department was, like most at the time, still steeped in the American tradition of "straight" photography. Robert Frank was the most influential photographer with Walker Evans behind him as a father figure. I appreciated the respect for craft and tradition that reigned in the photo department but was often dismayed and frustrated by the accompanying disdain for newer approaches. The climate of the school was mildly bohemian, often crudely political and anti-intellectual. Current approaches to photography or the newly translated cultural theories were rarely discussed in classes and lectures. The exception to this was the "Art Now" courses taught by Ian Wallace.'*<sup>597</sup> It was here, as Arden remarked, that

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<sup>594</sup> Gale 1987.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Wallace taught at UBC 1967-70 and at the Vancouver Art School 1972-98. Hauser & Wirth Gallery n.d.

<sup>597</sup> Arden 2005.



Wallace ‘discussed the aesthetics and cultural theories of the time, introducing his students to Feminism, the Frankfurt School, Post-Structuralism, and Semiotics’, as well as organizing guest lectures and seminars by artists.<sup>598</sup> Wallace’s aim was not only to introduce his students to contemporary art but also to make them familiar with the art-historical context and theories behind the artworks while also making them aware that they would succeed as artists only if they engaged in contemporary art debates – an approach that seemed to bear fruit, as Arden explained the need of the young artist to educate himself, spending the same amount of time in a library as with his camera.<sup>599</sup>

In addition, Vancouver’s Art Gallery offered an inspiring exhibition programme<sup>600</sup> including Vancouver’s own art production during the 1960s<sup>601</sup> and *Neue Sachlichkeit* drawings by Otto Dix,<sup>602</sup> photomontages by the artist of the Berlin Dada movement John Heartfield,<sup>603</sup> and photographs by the Bauhaus artist Moholy-Nagy.<sup>604</sup> Some exhibitions held there focused on Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptualism: in 1977, for example, works by Warhol were on display in the exhibition ‘*Andy Warhol: Working in Series*’,<sup>605</sup> and Robert Rauschenberg’s oeuvre was on show.<sup>606</sup> The Museum presented artists who utilized photography for their work in one form or another like Warhol and Rauschenberg, and also introduced their visitors to purely photographic work, for example by the Montreal artist Charles Gagnon,<sup>607</sup> who showed his photographic work in Vancouver for the first time.<sup>608</sup> Finally, in 1979 Ian Wallace showed his work there.<sup>609</sup>

The Vancouver Museum also organized an exhibition in 1980 entitled ‘*Forms of Realism Today – Formes du réalisme aujourd’hui*’ including the then unknown German

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

<sup>600</sup> All data about Vancouver Art Gallery’s exhibition programme were kindly provided by Cheryl Siegel, resident librarian and archivist.

<sup>601</sup> January to 29<sup>th</sup> September 1974: ‘*Vancouver through the 1960s*’.

<sup>602</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> January to 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1975: ‘*Otto Dix: Drawings from 1920-1960*’.

<sup>603</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> November to 30<sup>th</sup> November 1975: ‘*John Heartfield: Photomontages*’.

<sup>604</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> December 1976 to 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1977: ‘*Photographs of Moholy-Nagy 1895-1946*’.

<sup>605</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> March to 10<sup>th</sup> April 1977: ‘*Andy Warhol: Working in Series*’.

<sup>606</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> September to 29<sup>th</sup> October 1978: ‘*Robert Rauschenberg: Works from Captiva*’; 1<sup>st</sup> June to 12<sup>th</sup> June 1970: ‘*Warhol and Rauschenberg – From the Longstaffe Collection*’.

<sup>607</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> April 1971 to 9<sup>th</sup> May 1971: ‘*Photographs by Charles Gagnon*’.

<sup>608</sup> Godmer n.d.

<sup>609</sup> 21st September to 21st October 1979: ‘*Ian Wallace Works 1979*’.

artist Gerhard Richter, who exhibited four of his paintings.<sup>610</sup> The appearance of Richter's works at the Vancouver Museum in the 1970s gives rise to speculation and might not be a coincidence; it could be down to some European activities on the other side of Canada in Halifax, where the influential German art historian and curator Kaspar König worked at the Nova Scotia College Press between 1973 and 1977. During König's tenure Wall taught for a year in 1974 as an assistant professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art. It was also at the same institution that Richter was offered a visiting professorship, which he took up in 1978. There is a possibility that König actually met Wall and Richter during his time in Halifax; however they must have met later in the 1980s, when König became a professor at Düsseldorf's Art Academy and held the newly founded chair for '*art and publicity*'. König was succeeded at the Nova Scotia College Press by the influential art historian Benjamin Buchloh.<sup>611</sup>

König, well known in the German art scene, organized the '*Westkunst*' exhibition in Cologne in 1981; this was internationally recognized and well received, and included works by Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace. He also established an exchange programme for visiting artists at Düsseldorf's Academy,<sup>612</sup> which allowed him to invite Wall to Düsseldorf and provided the opportunity to introduce him to Gursky. Wallace's inclusion in the '*Westkunst*' exhibition also led to an invitation to exhibit at the German '*Documenta 7*' in 1982, organized by the Dutch art historian Rudolf Hermann Fuchs, who put a strong emphasis on new painting at the time.

Wallace, who followed developments in the art world with great interest, instituted a teaching module on '*The History of Media*' in which he introduced students to photography, printmaking, film and painting as pictorial sources which could be used singly or in combination.<sup>613</sup> Wallace, often called the inventor and pioneer of Vancouver's Photo-Conceptualism, brought the term into the public domain, using it to refer to any photography that originated from a sort of conceptual approach.<sup>614</sup> Wallace's teaching at the University is reflected in his own artworks, which often relate

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<sup>610</sup> '*Forms of Realism Today – Formes du réalisme aujourd'hui*', Vancouver Art Gallery 7<sup>th</sup> June to 20<sup>th</sup> July 1980. Richter exhibited the following paintings: '*Secretary*' (1963), Collection of the Federal Republic of Germany, '*Mother and Daughter*' (1965), Städtische Gallery, Schloss Overhausen, '*Kitchen Chair*' (1965), Städtische Kunsthalle, Recklinghausen, '*The Tiger*' (1965), Museum Leverkusen, Schloss Morsbroich.

<sup>611</sup> A more in-depth analysis of Buchloh's influence on the artistic work by Wall and Richter would be outside the remit of this thesis. Buchloh 2000.

<sup>612</sup> Tousley 2002a.

<sup>613</sup> Beirsto/Killas n.d.

<sup>614</sup> Kiefer 2011.

to art-historical and theoretical sources. Compared to Wall he uses art-historical hints and theoretical traces in a more decodable way, as is shown by his large-scale photograph *'The Calling'* (1977) (Plate 40). Wallace exhibited the staged photograph, which is modelled on Caravaggio's *'La vocazione di San Matteo'* (1599-1600) (Plate 41), in 1978 at the Nova Gallery. The image depicts Wallace's friends, including Jeff Wall, in a somewhat prominent role. When Wall was asked by Arthur Lubow which figure he had chosen to re-stage in *'The Calling of St Matthew'*, he replied: *'Jesus. I probably wouldn't have settled for any other role.'*<sup>615</sup> Wallace aimed for a contemporary remake of Caravaggio's masterpiece, dressing his cast in contemporary clothing and depicting the whole scene in black and white and assembling parts of it as a collage *'with scissors and glue from different exposures'*, as Arden remarked.<sup>616</sup> In the same year Jeff Wall exhibited *'The Destroyed Room'* (1978) at the Nova Gallery. The image, as explained earlier,<sup>617</sup> was modelled on Delacroix's *'The Death of Sardanapalus'* (1827) in respect of its composition and the overall theme. Unlike Wallace's re-staged photograph after Caravaggio, Wall's image was more a reference to Delacroix's classic painting. Wall excluded the actual figures and depicted not the actual rage, as had Delacroix, but the devastation and its aftermath, allowing the ransacked room to speak for itself.

Whereas Wall has always remained within the boundaries of his photographic medium, Wallace has opened them up and produced a variety of photo-related work combined with other pictorial approaches. His art, originating from abstract painting and sculpture influenced by Minimalism, and often related to the Italian and German *Arte Povera*, has taken a different direction since the late 1960s when he started using photography more frequently. In the 1970s, for example, he worked with film and video, using it as a source material or for individual works, also producing photo-montages which he repeatedly cut and pasted, re-photographed and hand-coloured.<sup>618</sup> He also created staged tableaux, photo-murals and composite images and, since the 1980s, has combined monochrome painting and documentary photography in his images.<sup>619</sup>

Even though their work approaches might differ, Wallace and Wall are united in their interest in public and private spaces as well as in the documentary appearance of their images, often created at great expense. Wall, having found street photographs

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<sup>615</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>616</sup> Arden 2005.

<sup>617</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>618</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>619</sup> Canadian Art Online 2010.

'aesthetically limited',<sup>620</sup> decided early on to stage such scenes with actors as, for example, in *'Mimic'* (1982).<sup>621</sup> Wallace had a similar intention when he produced his series *'My Heroes in the Street'* (1986) depicting, at first sight, random shots of people in the street. Again, Wallace used friends and colleagues for the series and selected certain urban environments for them in order to produce the archetypal situations a city inhabitant faces in his/her daily life. Another series by Wallace is concerned with private space, the interior. *'In the Studio'* (1984) depicts the artist sitting at his desk writing, seated on a bed reading, and looking at large-scale photographs and a blank canvas. The images were shot in a rented space and not in Wallace's studio; the situations were carefully staged to create mock documentary shoots. This approach can also be seen in Wall's work, but often with far more expenditure. Wall's image *'A View from an Apartment'* (2004)<sup>622</sup> depicts a specially rented apartment which he photographed between May 2004 and March 2005. His aim was the depiction of an interior space with an urban view. Wall searched several months for the perfect setting of the apartment; he held castings to find a young woman who would suit the picture. In order to create an authentic-looking environment, he asked the woman on the left in the picture to furnish the flat and live in it. Wall encouraged her to spend as much time in it as possible in order to create an authentic space rather than just a film set.<sup>623</sup> He then started to take pictures on various occasions while she lived there and digitally combined them. In this particular case, Wall was able to capture the essence of this inhabited space. By digitally combining images from different dates and times, he compressed time into one image, an approach that can also be seen in Gursky's image *'Mayday V'* (2006), which depicts the *Westphalenhalle*, a concert hall in Dortmund, Germany, during a techno-rave event.<sup>624</sup> Here, Gursky took different shots over a period of five hours and joined them digitally together. Unlike Gursky, Wall's work uses cinematographic principles: working in a staged setting and shooting over a period of time allows him to get to know his 'actors' and engage with them, resulting in a narrative character for the photograph which would normally be reserved for film. Wall once remarked: *'By watching films, I learnt a lot about the relationship between*

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<sup>620</sup> Burnett 2005a, 20.

<sup>621</sup> Chapter III.

<sup>622</sup> Tate Online n.d.

<sup>623</sup> Fried 2008, 56-57. Wall's image provides the cover of Fried's book.

<sup>624</sup> Chapter II.

*performance, staging, design, composition and photography, so that I see film as a principle model [sic] for photography.*<sup>625</sup>

## **6. Wall's Fellow Students: The Diversity of Photo-Conceptualism**

Whereas the spectator of Wall's photographs might question whether the depicted scene is real or staged, the spectator of Roy Arden's images is often confronted with plain social reality and its *tristesse*. Arden, the son of Finnish immigrants, first studied religion and art history at Langara College and then began in the late 1970s his studies with Ian Wallace and Iain Baxter at the Vancouver Art School. It was here that he attended Wallace's 'Art Now' course together with Stan Douglas. They became friends and were influenced by Wallace and Wall's work.<sup>626</sup> In 1990, Arden finished his Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Jeff Wall.<sup>627</sup> Arden recalled about this time that Wallace '*was a very inspirational teacher*', but by the time he studied with Wall, he '*was already formed and had been exhibiting as an artist for a decade*', a fact that explained Arden's statement that their relationship was more like that of peers.<sup>628</sup>

Arden's first and more widely recognized work was a series of 125 photographs titled '*Fragments*' (1981-85) (Plate 42) which he started while still studying at the Vancouver Art School, consisting of small-scale 6x6 cm transparencies shot with a twin-lens Rolleiflex camera.<sup>629</sup> The images are arranged in alphabetical order depicting for example people like Ian Wallace as well as bean sprouts, a cloud, three self-portraits of Arden, a tailor's shop window and a wound on a hand. Arden commented on his '*Fragment*' series: '*The tenor of Fragments is essentially melancholic...My milieu at that time was a loose-knit group of young, mildly bohemian, Vancouver artists and poets. The portraits are not about identity or character so much as being – regarding the person as someone who inhabits a body.*'<sup>630</sup> The series includes three self-portraits of Arden which reflect on his own being: principally documenting his private memories. He is shown hidden under a jacket reflected in a mirror, photographing his Rolleiflex camera and one or both of his hands. The series is characterized by its encyclopaedic

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<sup>625</sup> Wagstaff 2005b, 13.

<sup>626</sup> Arden 2005.

<sup>627</sup> Tousley 2002b.

<sup>628</sup> Baker 2008.

<sup>629</sup> Arden 2002.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

character which allowed Arden to capture the things he was interested in and which have defined his life so far, like his friends and fellow artists, his photographic medium and the city of Vancouver, often depicted through details of urban landscape. The presentation of these images as a series also makes it possible to create a more complete picture of Arden's native surroundings for the spectator. In 1985, when the series ended, Arden commented: '*It was the need to escape from subjectivity that caused me to finish with "Fragments"*'.<sup>631</sup>

Arden's work often focuses on his surroundings, depicting subject matters of everyday life, sometimes with social relevance. One of his earlier works is '*Rupture*' (1985), consisting of photographs which he found in the public archive and his own photographs. The images are displayed as nine diptychs combining nine images of a blue-sky shoot by Arden and nine journalistic photographs from the public archive about the Bloody Sunday riot in Vancouver in 1938. '*Rupture*' depicts a group of unemployed men occupying the Hotel Georgia, the Post Office and the Vancouver Art Gallery. The idyllic monochromes of the blue sky stand in a stark contrast to the archival images of the riot. It could be said that here street photography meets 'colour field photography' and brings about a sense of the uncanny of history and disaster concerning the forgotten struggle of the underprivileged working class or, as Wall has put it, '*In Roy Arden's archival works of the 1980s, local history is depicted under the sign of catastrophe*'.<sup>632</sup>

Since the early 1990s, after finishing his studies with Wall, Arden has begun to photograph even more of Vancouver's urban environment. The images often show stunning similarities to Wall's urban photographs, in particular to his '*near-documentary*' and '*documentary*' photographs. Arden focuses on the '*landscape of the economy*'<sup>633</sup> and captures the constant changes and transformations a cityscape has to face given the changing political and economic realities, a theme also familiar to Wall. Arden's subject matters present the transformation of natural landscapes into building sites, as in '*Tree Stump, Nanaimo, BC*' (1991) depicting a felled tree, or the consequences of the real-estate boom pictured in '*Construction Site and Suntower, Vancouver BC*' (1992).

Arden's topics are the forgotten, invisible or ordinary ones, just as Walker Evans documented the discards and remnants of society – trashed cans, car wrecks and

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid

<sup>632</sup> Wall 2007b, 111.

<sup>633</sup> Baker 2008.

deserted houses.<sup>634</sup> These are subject matters that can also be seen in Arden's work, as when he portrayed the ugliness of the modern metropolis: a gum spot on a pavement ('*Gum Spot 1*' (2005)), an abandoned car wreck ('*D'Elegance 2*' (2000)) or the colourful mass-product display of a supermarket ('*Wal-Mart Store*' (1996)), a subject matter which also fascinated Gursky in his image '*99 Cent*' (1999).<sup>635</sup>

And even though Arden portrayed only his Canadian home town, he created general metaphors that stand for the problems of global urbanization. Arden once remarked about his '*landscape of the economy*': '*It has been my attempt to register the transformative effects of modernity as they are revealed in any everyday experience of the landscape. Through this work I have also sought to explore and articulate a Realism which is informed by my understanding of tradition. I have drawn on artists as diverse as [Albrecht] Dürer, [Christen] Kobke, [Eugene] Atget, Walker Evans, Robert Smithson and [Per] Pasolini. I see this art history as a toolbox of tropes, strategies and devices with which I can interpret my experience.*'<sup>636</sup> This is an opinion that seems to be shared by his contemporaries, like Gursky or Wall; for Gursky art history provides '*a generally valid formal vocabulary*'<sup>637</sup> and for Wall art-historical theories and philosophical concepts offer a method to understand modernity and capture the essence of everyday life in his work.<sup>638</sup>

Arden does not work exclusively with photographs; he has also broadened his spectrum with video installations and digital collages. In 2007, he started his first online art project titled '*The World as Will and Representation*' (2007–ongoing).<sup>639</sup> The project displays 28,144 images in a ninety-minute slideshow to a soundtrack by Timmy Thomas, '*Why Can't We Live Together*', without the lyrics: the slides change in time to the beat of the music. In Arden's encyclopaedic digital slideshow of the world, the images are displayed briefly in alphabetical order from Aluminium to Asphalt and so on. This growing image archive originates from Arden's own photographs, the internet and other sources. Arden offers the spectator an insight into the vast amount of subject

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<sup>634</sup> Plates in: Mora/Hill 1993, Plates 332, 349, 351. Plate 332 '*Trashed Cans*', New York (c.1968), Plate 349 '*Truck Grill*', Connecticut (1973-74), Plate 351 '*Building Shell*', Unknown location (1973-74).

<sup>635</sup> Chapter II.

<sup>636</sup> Vancouver Art Gallery n.d.

<sup>637</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>638</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>639</sup> Arden n.d.

matters which have simply been forgotten, overlooked or already destroyed and preserves them in his online archive.

Arden's work, which is exclusively archival, can be inserted into the tradition of Realism; he depicts his surroundings as he sees and finds them, without any ornamentation: for example *'Old Red Wood Frame House, Vancouver BC'* (1992), depicting a house somewhere in Vancouver's suburbia, or *'Condominium Advertisement'* (1992), depicting a vast advertisement billboard in a parking lot. Arden also sometimes combines his own photographs with documentary photographs from archives, as in *'Rupture'* (1985). The common trait uniting most of his images is that they portray the traces of human beings, focusing on the urban landscape and social history. Arden often works with a serial approach: for his digital collage *'The Terrible One'* (2007) he assembled fifty-five photographs of internal combustion engines, creating an encyclopaedia of a particular theme or subject matter, like Sander, Blossfeldt or the Bechers. Individual shots in Arden's oeuvre often combine elements of street and documentary photography which one might associate with Walker Evans. Arden once remarked about Evans: *'Walker Evans was certainly a photographic god in the 70s and his work has survived all the critiques of the recent past, emerging as the most important photographic oeuvre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I remember how important it was for me to see his prints at Nova [Gallery], studying from books is good and fine, but never quite real until completed by first-hand experience. When a young artist [sees] the Master's original work, it closes the theoretical stage of the young artist's development with an affirmative thud – signalling the move to action.'*<sup>640</sup> Arden's work has been influenced by Evans's documentary style, which focuses on a detailed, descriptive and objective documentation and portrays the plain and sometimes gruesome side of social reality. In particular, Evans's photographs during his brief employment from 1935 to 1937 at the US government agency for Farm Security Administration documented the poor living conditions and circumstances of the American rural population during the Depression.<sup>641</sup> Arden, like Evans, has never been afraid of depicting subject matters of everyday life which would otherwise be overlooked or appear insignificant; through his photographs these subject matters are able to display a certain aesthetic which would otherwise have been invisible. His oeuvre consists mainly of photographs originating from Vancouver and its surrounding areas; often these images document changes resulting from social or economic issues

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<sup>640</sup> Arden 2005.

<sup>641</sup> Some of these images were later exhibited in 1938 in the influential Evans exhibition *'American Photographs'* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



and to the human urge to modernize and embrace the global '*Zeitgeist*'. In a way, Arden has built up an extensive pictorial archive of Vancouver which equally preserves the conspicuous and the inconspicuous.

Arden's interest in the history of his native town is shared by the Chinese-Canadian Ken Lum, a fellow Vancouver artist who also studied with Wall at Simon Fraser University and later with Wallace. Lum graduated in 1985 with a Master in Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia. He too has taught art and art history at different institutions, has worked on several public art projects and has curated numerous exhibitions.<sup>642</sup> Lum works with a variety of media including photography, painting and sculpture, and his work is often concerned with issues of identity, in particular race, gender, immigration and class. In '*Untitled (Language Painting)*' (1987), for example, the recipient is confronted with randomly assembled capital letters on a red background, arranged horizontally, vertically and diagonally in rows like '*FDLQPGFGKMZG*' or '*LTOBKKL*'. The spectator is unable to read or decode them in any way, bringing him/her into a similar position to an immigrant who is confronted with the challenge of making sense of the new language that surrounds him/her.

Like Wall and Arden, Lum is interested in everyday life experiences or objects transferring them through his work into the context of modern art. Lum contributed to the Olympic and Paralympic Public Art Programme in Vancouver with a 20-metre high illuminated street sign entitled '*Monument for East Vancouver*' (2010) (Plate 43). The sign displays the words '*EAST VAN*' in capital letters arranged with the two words sharing the letter '*A*' as in a crossword, illuminated by white LED lights and surrounded by a cross-shaped frame of blue LED lights. The sign appears from the distance like a cross, allowing for religious connotations. Its text referred to a graffito that Lum remembered from his childhood in East Vancouver; he added in an interview that sometimes '*the phrase would be accompanied by the word "rules"*', and probably originated from gang insignia for territorial marking.<sup>643</sup> With this monument Lum spans the gap between illegal, officially undesirable graffito found in hidden-away or unspectacular places to publicly displayed large-scale installation on a prominent spot in East Vancouver which has the potential to become a regional icon. How long the phrase was already around seems to be difficult to establish but it might refer to the 1940s and 1950s, when the east side of Vancouver was inhabited by multi-ethnic immigrants and the west side of the city was occupied by the white Canadian

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<sup>642</sup> Schafhausen 2010.

<sup>643</sup> Griffin 2009.

population.<sup>644</sup> By using the phrase for his installation Lum highlighted a little-known piece of local history which might otherwise be forgotten. His '*Monument for East Vancouver*' (2010) also combines popular culture and everyday life with art by using an LED advertisement sign for his installation work.

Rodney Graham has a completely different work approach from his fellow Photo-Conceptualist artists. His work is complex, without any boundaries, and mostly unclassifiable, investigating cultural history with different mediums, or as Jeff Wall has put it: '*Rodney Graham's work implicates itself in a complex of philosophical, aesthetic, historical, and social issues, and does so in novel and unexpected ways.*'<sup>645</sup> His work includes film, videos, photography, installation, drawing, painting, sculpture and print, and is often influenced by literature, music and philosophy. Except for his one year of study, from 1979 to 1980, with Ian Wallace, he is mainly self-taught. During his time at Simon Fraser University he attended Wallace's lectures on Minimalistic and Post-Minimalistic art and played with Wall and Frank Johnston, another artist, in the New Wave band UJ3RK5 (read as 'you jerks'). He also became interested in Post-Structuralism and psychology, but in the end left University in 1973 without finishing his bachelor degree.<sup>646</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, Graham experimented with the photographic medium and worked several times with the optical principles of the *camera obscura*. For one project he used a *camera obscura* high above the ground on a platform in order to document the growth process of a newly planted tree. At the end of the 1970s, he built a '*Camera Obscura*' (1979) the size of a garden shed, which was destroyed in 1981. The shed took the form of a white oblong metal box was erected on a field of the Graham family farm near Abbotsford in British Columbia on the highest point of a slope. The box was fitted with a lens on one side, facing a tree.<sup>647</sup> Graham's audience had to drive to the artwork in order to view the actual subject matter: a tree. The model for Graham's large-scale *camera obscura* and the image of the upside-down tree were displayed in a gallery. The complete work was never united in one place which, for Wall, is also a comment on '*the widening split between city and country*'.<sup>648</sup>

In the mid-1990s, Graham worked with film and video, in which he often appeared as the main character. In '*Vexation Island*' (1997), shown at the Canadian Pavilion at

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<sup>644</sup> Schafhausen 2010.

<sup>645</sup> Wall 2007c.

<sup>646</sup> Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal n.d.

<sup>647</sup> Images of Graham's '*Camera Obscura*' (1979) in: Wall 2007a, 96.

<sup>648</sup> Wall 2007c, 95.

the Venice Biennale in 1997, the spectator sees a stranded pirate, accompanied by a parrot, lying unconscious with a head wound on the beach of an island.<sup>649</sup> The only noises are the occasional croakings of the parrot, the rush of the sea and the breeze of the wind. The camera repeatedly captures the idyllic island, the face of the pirate, the parrot, the beach and the horizon for some minutes. Nothing happens, which creates an unbearable suspense, until the pirate awakes. After a moment of disorientation he walks to a palm tree and begins to shake its stem, making a coconut fall right on top of his head, causing him to fall unconscious to the ground and everything to start again. Graham uses an endless loop for his film. Immediately one is reminded of Sisyphus, king of Corinth, whose punishment by Zeus was to roll a rock up a hill, but before reaching the top, the rock would roll down and he had to start again.<sup>650</sup>

The Sisyphean task is often interpreted as a symbol for a heroic human being who consciously accepts the absurdity of life and his/her own existence in it. According to the French philosopher Albert Camus, Sisyphus was the archetype of an absurd and 'tragic' hero and the Sisyphean task a metaphor for modern life: '*The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious.*'<sup>651</sup>

In Graham's case, he uses a metaphor of existentialism but combines it with a typically slapstick scene. Any aspects of existential philosophy or the fundamental question about the essence and purpose of life itself become absurd on Graham's Sisyphean island. The purpose of life is repeatedly to be knocked unconscious by a falling coconut, accompanied by the constant noise of the sea and the incessant croaking of the parrot, without any means of escaping this constant vexation. With his presentation of '*Vexation Island*' (1997) as an endless loop he captivates the spectator and leaves him with only one option: if he cannot bear it any longer he has to walk away.

Having explored photography and film, Graham began from 2000 onwards to work with painting and drawing. Some of his paintings are modelled on famous paintings, like '*The Glass of Beer*' (2005) depicting Graham sitting in a chair with a glass of beer in one hand, which refers to Édouard Manet's study of Émile Bellot titled '*Le Bon Bock*' (A Good Glass of Beer) (1873)<sup>652</sup> as well as to Andy Warhol's self-portraits. His work

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<sup>649</sup> Kendincos Net Sharing Platform n.d.

<sup>650</sup> Ziegler/Sontheimer (eds.) 1979, Vol. 5, 214-215.

<sup>651</sup> Camus 2005, 128.

<sup>652</sup> A similar approach has been adopted in Wall's work that relates to Manet and which is also strongly influenced by the writings of T.J.Clark. See Chapter III.

*'Allegory of Folly: Study for an Equestrian Monument in the Form of Wind Vane'* (2005) shows Graham as the philosopher Erasmus riding the wrong way round on a metal horse sculpture presented as a diptych. Referring to art-historical sources or modelling on well-known scenes or composition schemes is something which can also be seen in Wall (Manet), Ruff (Dürer) or Gursky (Lorrain).<sup>653</sup>

In 2010, Graham contributed to the Winter Olympics Public Art Programme with a sculpture for the Stanley Park in Vancouver. The sculpture was titled *'Aerodynamic Forms in Space'* (2010) (Plate 44) and was modelled on a series of photographs which Graham shot in Vancouver in 1977. These images depict, as Graham explains, *'a series of "incorrectly" assembled toy glider kits'*.<sup>654</sup> Graham assembled the models wrongly on purpose only looking for *'their aesthetic value as purely abstract sculptural forms'*.<sup>655</sup> The entrance to the park was, in Graham's opinion, the perfect setting for a sculpture that refers to a kid's toy which might be a common sight in a park. Asked about the title *'Aerodynamic Forms in Space'*, Graham remarked: *'The title of the work is meant to evoke, in a slightly humorous way ... that of a classical modernist public monument of a bygone period, elements of which the sculpture plays with.'*<sup>656</sup>

Graham is an artist who likes to use multiple media, enjoying the experiment and challenges involved. He has worked with film, video and photography, drawing, prints and paintings as well as installations. He often tries to combine ordinary, daily occurrences with elements of cultural history sometimes with an ironic view like *'Vexation Island'* (1997), where the existentialism of the Sisyphean task becomes paradox and comical. Graham's work often examines the border between fiction and reality. Whereas Wall is interested in the *'unchosen people'*, Graham seems to be interested in *unchosen* moments of human life, often depicting odd, unforeseen or curious behaviour, as for example in his film *'How I Became a Rambling Man'* (1999), which features a cowboy who accompanies himself on a guitar singing about his life, then rides away on his horse, only to come back and start all over again. Graham often uses elements of repetition, not only in his films and videos; they are a formal principle of his whole oeuvre.

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<sup>653</sup> See also Chapter II, III, IV.

<sup>654</sup> Vancouver City Council n.d.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

## **7. The Inescapable Look and the Eye of the Beholder**

By way of conclusion we could say that the Becher students are first of all united by their teachers' strict aim to document a subject matter as truthfully and realistically as possible and with all means of descriptive and pictorial characteristics offered by the photographic medium. Höfer, for example, draws the eye of the spectator to places which are easily overlooked in our daily lives. She depicts series of public places, interiors and sometimes anonymous spaces like lounges. Her subject matters are photographed from a natural viewpoint often from different angles and always without artificial light arrangements. Struth, the only trained painter in the Becher class, although working with a serial approach and being interested in the documentation of spaces and objects, has created staged photographs with his '*Pergamon Museum*' series (2001), in which he worked with a cast of 150 people.<sup>657</sup> Like Höfer, Struth depicts interiors, but his oeuvre also includes a wide range of genres ranging from portraits, city- and landscapes to flowers. Hütte's images remain at first sight in the *neusachliche* Becher tradition; they often combine several conceptual layers which question the documentary character of photography and portray a fictitious objectivity through the use of certain perspectives and composition arrangements. Ruff explores the photographic surface with multiple techniques and technical devices, even experimenting with photographic prints on canvas. Questioning the boundaries and construction of photographic images has become an important task in itself in his work. Gursky, who aims to build up an '*encyclopaedia of life*',<sup>658</sup> has left the objective Becher method behind and is not interested in typologies and archival approaches. The only two remaining elements that characterize him nowadays as a Becher student are, firstly, his preference for clear and often geometric structures as in, for example, '*Ayamonte*' (1997) or his digital collage '*Bonn, Bundestag*' (1998) and, secondly, the fact that his images retain the certain credibility that the depicted subject matters exist in reality. Gursky's images often appear to depict reality even when they are digitally altered.

All the Becher students aim in one form or another to document their subject matter, even though this might be used only as a basis for their pictorial ideas (Gursky, Ruff). Whereas their early photographs, in particular during their time in the Becher class,

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<sup>657</sup> Fried 2008, 134-135.

<sup>658</sup> Meister 2001.

displayed specific similarities, mainly because of a strict serial approach with comparable views, their later works have changed significantly and display an individual visual vocabulary originating either from technical aspects – i.e. view camera (Gursky, Hütte, Ruff, Struth) or miniature camera (Höfer), small-scale prints (Höfer) or large-scale prints (Gursky, Hütte, Ruff, Struth),<sup>659</sup> digital manipulation (Gursky, Ruff), use of different technical devices (Ruff) – or, on the other hand, originating from compositional aspects – i.e. oblique views (Höfer, Ruff) or panoramic views (Gursky) and wide-angle shots (Hütte, Struth). In regard to the themes the students have portrayed in their photographs it can be noted that all of them have a general interest in architecture – both exterior and interior views of buildings – as well as in urban spaces and landscapes (Gursky, Höfer, Hütte Ruff, Struth) and some of them have also included series of portraits in their oeuvre (Ruff, Struth).

The Becher students' interest in the documentation of spaces, whether constructed (architectural interiors or exteriors) or natural (landscapes), allows one to relate their compositions to Renaissance paintings. The Italian architect and sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) discovered mathematically based perspective, described by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) in his treatise '*Della Pittura*'.<sup>660</sup> The often so-called *linear perspective* allowed Renaissance artists to construct a three-dimensional pictorial space around a central vanishing point in order to achieve a realistic and optical correct representation.<sup>661</sup> The painter Paolo Uccello (c. 1397/1400-75) in particular benefited from Brunelleschi's discovery. He based his compositions on a mathematically accurate calculated perspective; for example his six panels '*The Profanation of the Host*' (1467-69), created for the *predella* (platform) of an altar in Urbino, portray highly constructed pictorial spaces which evolve around a central vanishing point. The composition looks like a finely woven net of horizontal and vertical lines. Uccello also applied different vanishing points in composition and experimented with the effects different colours can have on a three-dimensional impression.<sup>662</sup> Not only was perspective of importance to Renaissance artists, but the application of certain viewpoints, for example whether the painting depicted a central perspective, a worm's eye-view, or a bird's-eye perspective, could influence perception of the space.

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<sup>659</sup> Ruff's enlargement of his portrait series in 1986 caused all the other students except Höfer to follow his example.

<sup>660</sup> Stadler (ed.) 1994, Vol. 9, 124.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid., Vol. 12, 53; Walther (ed.) 1995, Vol. 2, 753.

In the case of the Becher students it can be observed that their photographs often analyse spaces. Some try to organize the space (Gursky) or work out how things in the portrayed space are related to each other (Höfer, Struth); others transform the space through their pictorial representation (Ruff, Hütte, Struth). In addition, their photographs seem to be dominated by geometrical forms consisting of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines. Sometimes this can originate from the actual depicted subject matter, in particular if architecture is portrayed in any way: for example Hütte's '*Saint Jean-de-Maurienne*' (1996) showing a steel bridge construction in front of a landscape view or Gursky's '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993) depicting the front façade of a vast building block. In addition it is necessary to distinguish between the Becher students who work with analogue and digital photography. Höfer, Struth, and Hütte work analogue; digital manipulation does not occur in their images. They compose their photographs while choosing an intriguing viewpoint or depicting the subject matter from an interesting perspective or an unusual angle. In contrast the other two Becher students, Gursky and Ruff, compose their pictorial spaces digitally at the computer. This can result in mathematically constructed spaces that intensify the appearance of geometrical grids, for example in Gursky's photograph '*Bibliothek*' (1999) or in Ruff's '*Jpeg*' series, started in 2004.

Whereas the Bechers' oeuvre consisted exclusively of industrial and domestic architectures, which made feasible the application of their strict method, their students began to expand their range of subject matters. This expansion required a much more individual approach to photography, which resulted in the utilization of various, sometimes more subjective, compositional aspects, as already mentioned. Consequently, the Bechers' favoured approach to photography in typological series also slowly dissolved; instead the students were interested in overarching themes or groups, but not with the intention of presenting comparable views. Over time the former Becher students have developed a far more individual and subjective approach; it seems that the aim to depict the subject matter with the utmost objectivity has been seen as an unachievable ideal and has changed. Obvious subjective interpretations and interference are still kept to a minimum in their photographs, but the Becher students seem to have come closer to Gerhard Richter's conception of questioning photographic representation and using it as a means to composition, perspective and sometimes digital manipulation (Gursky and Ruff) to create their own pictorial idea. The Becher students are clearly united by their conceptual interest in the design and composition of their photographs, often oscillating between documentary and staged approaches. Their photographs, especially Ruff's and Gursky's works, question the pictorial character of photography, in particular the idea that photography can be seen

as an imitative technique that provides the spectator with a truthful message of indexical signs relating to the depicted object. Their photographs remind the spectator that s/he cannot be relieved from the task of looking, given that the subjective truth probably lies in the eye of the beholder; even though the Becher students are pigeon-holed as standing in line with the '*neusachliche*' tradition their images are, like paintings, self-referential art representations.

On the other hand, the Vancouver movement has to be seen in the tradition of the Pop Art and Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas the Pop Art movement united popular culture with practices often used by the advertising trade to visualize general objects of daily life and consumption, Conceptualism rigorously detached itself from the general idea of an artwork that had to have an apparent aesthetic; instead it used all the available material and media in order to establish a new and broader definition of artworks and their aesthetic. The oeuvre of these artists includes icons of the world of popular culture and a multitude of conceptual approaches (Wallace, Lum, Graham, Wall), encyclopaedic and archival approaches (Arden), and developments from Dadaistic practices, like photo-montage and photo-collage (Wallace, Arden, Wall), often realized digitally. Furthermore, there are elements of Photo-Realistic paintings (Wallace, Arden), straight photography (Arden, Wall, Wallace), staged photography (Wall, Wallace) and digitally altered photography (Wall). These artists are inspired by and frequently incorporate literature, cinema, music or art-historical references in their work, which is often concerned with the investigation of daily life.

The interest in subject matters that appear common, and taken from our daily lives, seems to unite the Düsseldorf and Vancouver artists. The spectator finds street views, interiors, buildings or scenes of urban living. They have revived and used classical genres, like portrait or landscape – formerly exclusively the preserve of the fine arts – for their photography (Düsseldorf) or their conceptual art (Vancouver). Their work often focuses on overlooked subject matter, like a chewing gum spot, a barely noticeable passer-by or a public hallway, which would have been excluded by the traditional art categories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, through their conceptual approaches their work often displays philosophical, technical or social findings, which in nearly all cases, sometimes even unintentionally, bring these artists back to the ideas of modernism in the traditional sense of Baudelaire's '*Painter of Modern Life*', who rejected in his essay the idealization of traditional artworks in favour of the depiction of the often overlooked daily life.

The Düsseldorf and Vancouver artists belong to the first generation that was able to attend photography classes at art academies. Their teachers were still educated differently: either they trained as commercial photographer (Hilla Becher), were self-



taught (Bernd Becher), studied with trained graphic artists and illustrators (Bernd and Hilla Becher) or began on a more theoretical level by studying art history at first (Ian Wallace). The photographic medium made its way into the art academies and university art departments during the 1960s and 70s, as the influential Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Szarkowski, has pointed out: *'The introduction of photography into art schools and university art departments had a number of unanticipated effects. One of these byproducts was an increased fraternization between photographers and practitioners of the traditional plastic arts. This intimacy encouraged a mutual borrowing of ideas and techniques across borders that had been well guarded since the experiments of the 1920s, except in the world of commercial art.'*<sup>663</sup> Szarkowski explained that *'photography's visual vocabulary'*, whether it was a *'selective focus, the blur described by moving objects or the tonal abbreviations caused by under and over-exposure [...]'* – *were adopted and adapted by many painters and printmakers during the 1960s, most notably by Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.*<sup>664</sup> However, inverting that process and trying to apply painterly practices to photography, as Szarkowski remarked, proved to be more difficult, and was at the time limited mainly to *'drawing and painting'* onto photographs *'or [...] cutting them in to pieces'*.<sup>665</sup> The possibilities of working with digital photographs would open up these processes and allow photographers, like Gursky and Wall, to borrow from art history's rich visual vocabulary.

But in the meantime, during the mid-1960s, Szarkowski strongly believed that photography could gain equal status with the fine arts only if it focused on its own tradition and means.<sup>666</sup> The oeuvre of the Bechers and their way of teaching the first photography class at a German art academy in 1976 tried to fulfil such an ambition; it changed perceptions about photography as an art form and helped the Becher students to be trained and seen in a fine-art context. However, the Bechers' strict serial method was rooted in a European tradition that saw photography first and foremost as a handicraft, as Szarkowski remarked: *'In Europe, in schools such as Hans Finsler's Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich and Otto Steinert's Folkwangschule in Essen, pedagogic styles continued to emphasize a relatively rigorous concentration on conventional craft virtue, and students of photography were more likely to be educated*

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<sup>663</sup> Szarkowski 1989, 272.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>666</sup> Szarkowski 2007.

*with future commercial artists and graphic-arts specialists than with painters and traditional printmakers.*<sup>667</sup>

The Bechers' own education reflects these circumstances. Their teaching was still influenced, on the one hand, by a focus on craftsmanship and a systematic manner, in particular in regard to their serial approach, but, on the other, their '*anonymous sculptures*'<sup>668</sup> of industrial structures, which won them the prize for best sculpture at the Venice Biennale of 1990, were also seen in the tradition of Minimalistic and Conceptual art. This view resulted from changes in the art world that took place from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, as the art historian Michael Archer has pointed out: '*The consequences of the loosening of categories and the dismantling of interdisciplinary boundaries was a decade, [...] in which art took a great many different forms and names: Conceptual, Arte Povera, Process, Anti-Form, Land, Environment, Body, Performance, and Political. These and others had their roots in Minimalism and the various off-shoots of Pop and New Realism.*'<sup>669</sup> The loosening of these traditional art categories also saw an increase in technical media like photography, film and video, which were exhibited at important exhibitions, for example at the German '*Documenta 6*' in 1977.

The Düsseldorf students were, in contrast to the Vancouver artists, exposed to a more pedagogic style, which, in particular at the beginning, can be seen in the use of a more similar visual vocabulary, a focus on photographic craftsmanship, and a systematic and sometimes still serial approach in their photographic medium. Both groups benefited from a more interdisciplinary approach, but while the Becher students slowly embraced different technical devices (Ruff) or more broader variations of subject matter (Gursky) in their oeuvre, the Vancouver artists embraced the opportunities to include art-historical and cultural theories in their work and to experiment with photography (Wallace, Arden) and the newly accessible video technology (Douglas). Roy Arden remarked about that time: '*In the 1960s and 70s the aesthetic values of traditional art photography were challenged by conceptual art and the various accompanying critiques of representation. Art in general, was in for the most radical interrogation or deconstruction since the period of the historic avant-gardes of Productivism, Dada, and Surrealism. All of the old criteria were discarded and everything and anything was possible.*'<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> Szarkowski 1989, 269.

<sup>668</sup> Honnef/Honnef-Harling (eds.) 2003, 150.

<sup>669</sup> Archer 2002, 61.

<sup>670</sup> Arden 2005.

The Bechers had been influenced by a more pedagogic approach and rigorous focus on photographic craftsmanship, elements which were still present in their teaching and which had an impact on their students; in the case of Ian Wallace, who has had an reputation as the ‘inventor’ of Photo-Conceptualism, one might speculate whether his teaching at the University of British Columbia and Vancouver Art School in 1968 could be seen in descent from the spirit of Moholy-Nagy, in particular in regard to Moholy-Nagy’s personal view about the general aim of an artist, who should use art in an experimental way to create new forms of expression that relate to modern everyday life.<sup>671</sup> Szarkowski has stated that Moholy-Nagy ‘regarded photography as a tool that all artists – indeed all educated people – would use, whatever their specialities, and he approached photographic education from this perspective.’<sup>672</sup> In his photographic approach his roots as a constructivist painter were evident; he liked abstract structures, unusual angles and photographic experimentation. In his book ‘*Malerei, Fotografie, Film*’ he published a selection of photographs that he had collected from magazines and newspapers to show the diversity and unlimited possibilities the photographic medium offered.<sup>673</sup>

Perhaps coincidentally there are some similarities between Wallace’s and Moholy-Nagy’s approaches. Wallace’s oeuvre displays the unlimited possibilities photography and other pictorial media offer. Well connected with the older generation of West Vancouver painters, like Jack Shadbolt and Gordon Smith,<sup>674</sup> Wallace has seen the photographic medium as a tool for his artistic work and has never abandoned his strong interest in painting. Although photography in the 1970s was still thought of as a documentary medium, Wallace began at the time to combine photographs with monochrome paintings, also including video and film in his oeuvre, by using it as a source material or for his actual images. Judging by the looks of his works he seemed to have favoured a documentary appearance in his photographs, although the often highly constructed images profoundly undermine this essential photographic characteristic. Once asked about his work he explained: ‘*I didn’t want to be the artist in the ivory tower isolated from the world with these very over-intellectual, perhaps rarefied artistic positions like minimalism and conceptualism, though I still found them valuable. So my idea was to try to convert the ideas in minimalism and conceptualism through photography to create a new language of art. I wasn’t the only one doing it, but*

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<sup>671</sup> Suhre 1990, 16.

<sup>672</sup> Szarkowski 1989, 269.

<sup>673</sup> Moholy-Nagy 1967.

<sup>674</sup> Beirsto, R./Killas, H. n.d.

*I did it my own way.*<sup>675</sup> Wallace created ‘a language of art’ which had an art-historical and academic base and allowed therefore, as Jeff Wall has put it in regard to his own work, ‘a historically and theoretically informed production.’<sup>676</sup> It can be said that Wallace’s ‘students’ have been very much engaged in the idea of Conceptualism, leaving aside the traditional boundaries and notions of art and focusing on ‘a historically and theoretically informed’ idea behind their actual work, which also might explain the broad variety of genres and media of the so-called ‘Photo-Conceptualists’. In comparison to the Becher students, whose works are very much rooted in the boundaries and tradition of their photographic medium, the oeuvre of the Vancouver artists includes multiple genres from photographs to video installation, film, sculpture and painting. The Düsseldorf artists were educated differently from their Canadian counterparts; while studying they experienced a strong student–teacher relationship with the Bechers and were bound together at first by their clear pedagogic concept. The Vancouver group, on the other hand, were linked by their educational background; however, no formal student–teacher relationship existed. This was a more collaborative, mutual and equal relationship of a group of peers who learned from and inspired each other, and probably still do.

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<sup>675</sup> Campbell 2004.

<sup>676</sup> Barents 2007, 186.

## **V. Suspense or Surprise:**

### **At the Interface between Photographic Images and Film Stills**

#### **1. From Standing Still to Moving On: The Moving Photograph**

While photography was still in its infancy, in order to take a serviceable picture the subject matter had to be static. Exposure times were long: early cameras had no shutters at all and later shutter speeds were still extremely slow.<sup>677</sup> So the subject matter had to remain static for some time and if it did not, the photograph would depict a blurred image, revealing the traces of a movement that had taken place. When camera techniques became more advanced, lenses and shutters became faster, speeding up exposure times. This gave rise to an interest in photographers in capturing objects in motion – best known of these are probably Eadweard J. Muybridge's photographs galloping horses<sup>678</sup> – and also sparked a more profound exploration of human vision.

The discovery that the human eye will perceive movement when looking at a series of slightly different, rapidly succeeding images<sup>679</sup> caused Joseph Plateau and Simon von Stampfer, working independently, to invent in 1832/33 an optical device which could be considered an ancestor of the moving film.<sup>680</sup> The stroboscopic disc, also known as a zoetrope, is a drum-shaped optical toy that enables a series of drawings or, later, photographs to appear to be in motion. The drum itself is fitted on a stand which can be rotated. The exterior has small slit-like openings spaced at a regular distance. The interior contains a strip of paper with a row of images, either drawings or photographs, fixed to the wall. The spectator spins the zoetrope and watches the

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<sup>677</sup> The invention of the calotype brought exposure times down to 'a few minutes, at best even ten seconds': Frizot 1998b.

<sup>678</sup> Shortened exposure times were needed for Muybridge's photographs, as Frizot explains: 'Photographic plates treated with gelatine-silver bromide emulsions (permitting 1/100 of a second exposure in around 1880) opened up the possibility of viewing or projecting scenes recorded in real time, in the form of sequential photographs. Muybridge in 1887 produced the first sequences showing horses in movement, composed of 12 views.' Frizot 1998d.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Koebner (ed.) 2007, 264-266.

images through the openings, where they give the illusion of movement.<sup>681</sup> The main principle of the zoetrope was later used for moving film and for the first film projector, called a '*cinématographe*': '*At the end of 1894 the Lumière brothers perfected a camera which used perforated film 35 mm wide, dragged along by a claw and held stationary by a pin, using a triangular cam like that on a sewing-machine, with a frequency of 20 images a second. The same apparatus was used for projection.*'<sup>682</sup> Strictly speaking, as Peter Ward has pointed out: '*These "films" were single-shot, "actualities" or documentary views with the camera framing a fixed point. They were considered as moving photographs.*'<sup>683</sup> What is notable here is that whether it was the zoetrope or the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe*, film consisted of innumerable single static framed images, i.e. still photographs; therefore the aesthetics, techniques, even sometimes iconography and narratives associated with film are, at least theoretically, also available for photography. The single shots of a film are strictly speaking in need of the same composition principles that apply to photographs. Both are two-dimensional depictions, like painting, and all the visual elements need to be organized in that selected and framed section. Whereas for film, ideally director and cameraman will 'compose' the pictorial space by '*choosing lens, lens height, camera angle, frame and positioning of subject*',<sup>684</sup> the composition of a photograph, at least in the analogue age, required the photographer to make a decision about the vantage point of the camera, lens and angle as well as the right moment to photograph. Composition of analogue photography was therefore predominantly influenced by the instantaneous. Photography utilizing digital techniques and consequently offering digital manipulation, revision, editing and montage gives the photographer the same tools to compress time and meaning in a single shot in order to compose a subject matter as has a film director while editing/cutting his/her film.

The editing process, whether in film or photography, offers the possibility of combining elements and details from numerous shots without the spectator being aware of it, a process comparable to that of painting, where the production process leaves no traces either. The option of editing photographs in such an extensive way, something that can be seen in some of Gursky's and Wall's photographs, requires them to shoot enough visual material to montage, a fact that changes the way photographers assess their subject matter.

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<sup>681</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood n.d.

<sup>682</sup> Frizot 1998d.

<sup>683</sup> Ward 2003.

<sup>684</sup> Ibid.

However, compared to the practitioners of the film trade these photographers face another challenge: unlike a movie, but like a painting, a photograph has to portray the essence of a plot, given that there is no explanatory beginning or end. There is no sound, therefore no dialogue or music, no movement and no passing of time. Its content is left solely to the viewer's imagination assessing what might have happened before and after the displayed scene.

That film and photography have been influenced by the fine arts, in particular by painting, seems to be well documented.<sup>685</sup> However, the impact of the film genre on photography is difficult to determine. This chapter examines whether film can be a source of inspiration for photography; therefore it takes an investigative look at the interface between the genres, examining in particular where they share common characteristics regarding techniques and iconography. Additionally, it aims to address and analyse similar and comparable aesthetic and stylistic elements in the oeuvre of photographers like Gursky, Wall and Douglas which arguably originate from film design and composition.

## **2. Unseen Places: Gursky**

A large part of Andreas Gursky's photographic oeuvre is the depiction of architectural spaces or of human mass. These photographs might not draw directly in a superficial or obvious way from film sources; however, it is still possible to see subtle iconographical allusions to film in his work.

An interesting example is the photograph '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993), which depicts the front façade of a huge building. The image has led among other things to comparisons with Abstract Expressionist painting<sup>686</sup> and in particular to '*the all-over of compositions of colour-field paintings*',<sup>687</sup> as pointed out earlier.<sup>688</sup> This interpretation results mainly from Gursky's preference for the depiction of an overall geometrical structure and its resemblance to colour-field painting that is created through the numerous windows of the building that give the impression, at least from a distant view, of a pattern of small coloured rectangles.

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<sup>685</sup> See for example: Schwerfel 2003; Vacche (ed.) 1997; Schönenbach 2000; Hensel (ed.) 2006.

<sup>686</sup> Galassi 2003, 31, 35; Company (ed.) 2004, 121.

<sup>687</sup> Company (ed.) 2004, 121.

<sup>688</sup> See Chapter II.

A closer look reveals that the colourful pattern has more to offer: the spectator is able to look through every window and discovers traces of either human life or humans.<sup>689</sup> Behind the windows there are people standing, clothes and furniture can be seen, toys and books are lying around, plants and vases stand on a windowsill. Suddenly the spectator becomes an observer, a fact that has caused curator Martin Hentschel<sup>690</sup> and Professor of Art History Michael Diers<sup>691</sup> to compare the photograph to Hitchcock's film *'Rear Window'* (1954). Hentschel remarked aptly: *'Paris, Montparnasse becomes a "rear window" blown up into megalomaniacal dimensions and tailored to the present day, while still maintaining the distance that is so decisive for Gursky.'*<sup>692</sup> According to Diers, Gursky has fostered such an interpretation with his enlargement of thirty views of the window of *'Paris, Montparnasse'* (1993), revealing even more of the residents' life.<sup>693</sup>

It is not only the inner life of that massive apartment block that enables comparisons to the film genre but also its architectural appearance. The huge orthogonal building offers a functional solution to the problem of housing in such a densely populated city as Paris. The façade with its numerous windows and concrete structure mirrors the practical and also the inhospitable aspects of this form of habitation. Gursky's oeuvre includes several depictions of tower blocks either as places of living (*'Hong Kong Island'* (1994), *'Copan'* (2002), *'Happy Valley II'* (1995)), of working (*'Hong Kong Shanghai Bank'* (1994), *'Kodak'* (1995), *'Avenue of the Americas'* (2001)) or of leisure (*'May Day V'* (2006)). These photographs depict an urbanized and engineered world in which humans need a place to be accommodated rather than to live. Humans surrender for practical, economic, ideological or political reasons to the tyranny of urban living. Gursky's images bear resemblance to the architecture in Fritz Lang's science fiction film *'Metropolis'* (1927). Lang, in his film set, used colossal buildings and skyscrapers which contrasted strongly with the proportions of the human inhabitants and accentuated their artificial, surreal and hostile living and working conditions.<sup>694</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> For the issue of microcosm versus macrocosm see Chapter II.

<sup>690</sup> Hentschel 2008, 22-3.

<sup>691</sup> Diers 2006, 127-130.

<sup>692</sup> Hentschel 2008, 28.

<sup>693</sup> Diers 2006, 130.

<sup>694</sup> For the film *'Metropolis'* Lang applied the so-called Schüfftan process, a special effect developed by the German cameraman Eugen Schüfftan and his collaborator Ernst Kunstmann. The process allows the merging of two images into one through the use of a semi-transparent glass-plate which is positioned at a 45° angle. All illuminated objects positioned at the side of the camera are reflected in the plate, and thus merge with the objects positioned in front of the



We can say that Gursky's photographs of Paris do something similar, by portraying the city – which people so strongly associate with *grands boulevards*, parks, cafés, museums and the river Seine – rigorously through modern architecture; he shows that human existence in the city is defined by its main purpose, to provide a workforce. Infrastructure, places of work and living are therefore functional and built to allow easy access to places of work, offer a work environment that encourages efficiency, and help 'to store' the workforce in the overpopulated city. Humans become small cogs in the big machine of a futuristic metropolis. Gursky's Paris, very much in the sense of Lang's '*Metropolis*', is depicted through tower blocks and concrete tennis courts in '*Paris, Beaugrenelle*' (1988), the apartment block in '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993) and the modern sky line of the business district in '*La Défense, Panorama*' (1987/93). He has also photographed interiors in Paris, for example '*PCF Paris*' (2003) depicting a digitally manipulated close-up of the ceiling of the domed hall of the Communist Party headquarters constructed by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Nothing in his images makes a direct reference that could be easily associated with Paris; instead these are buildings and interiors which can be found in every capital city of the world.

But it is not only the monumental architecture in those photographs which might remind one of Fritz Lang's '*Metropolis*'; there are also similarities regarding the content in a more metaphorical sense. Lang's '*Metropolis*' tells the story of the industrialist Joh Fredersen, who rules his modern empire from his headquarters in the Tower of Babel. It is a highly engineered world in which Fredersen and his kind live, oblivious to and ignorant about their surroundings and the co-existence of the working class. When Fredersen's son Freder tries to find working-class girl Maria, he witnesses a factory accident which kills many workers. He begins to realize that the prosperity of his family and of the affluent upper class is based on the exploitation of the workforce. In Lang's science fiction film the workers are portrayed as masses, working in a sort of underground world as well as living in a workers' city. In the end, the workers are reconciled with the industrialist Fredersen thanks to the help of his son Freder and the working-class girl Maria.

Gursky's oeuvre leaves the visible surface of the city behind, often representing an unseen subterranean iconography, including various depictions of the 'working-class underground world'. Some of his photographs focus on the workplace, with hardly any workers to be seen in these depictions. There are interiors of mass-production facilities

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camera. Most film stills in '*Metropolis*' were a combination of foreground, in which actors could be seen, and background, which consisted either of architectural drawings or miniature models of skyscrapers and urban buildings. Koebner 2007, 622.

like the factories in '*Amberg, Siemens*' (1991) or '*Schiesser, Diptych*' (1991). He has photographed research facilities, for example the Japanese neutrino observatory in the Mozumi mine deep below the town of Kamioka. The image '*Kamiokande*' (2007) depicts a water tank with walls made from thousands of sparkling photo-multipliers.<sup>695</sup> Other images, like '*Hamm, Bergwerk Ost*' (2008) (Plate 45), invite the spectator into the rarely seen environment of a miners' changing room in one of the last coal mines in Germany. These photographs portray working environments and conditions which are hidden from the public eye. Yet others of Gursky's images depict the masses of workers in their conformity without any individual characteristics, as in Lang's film. There are bird's-eye views like '*Nha Trang*' (2004), showing numerous basket weavers at work all dressed in their orange workwear, or another aerial perspective, '*Beelitz*' (2007), that depicts farm workers cutting asparagus in a field. In some of Gursky's photographs the spectator becomes Lang's '*Freder*' who is able to see for the first time the environment and the circumstances with which the working class has to cope.

As explained earlier, Gursky's photographs are often defined by three recurrent elements: an even distribution of attention, the essence of reality, and the iconography of the mass through the depiction of crowds of people, crowded places or objects that become an ornamental pattern through a distanced view.<sup>696</sup> Since 1992 Gursky has made increasing use of digital post-production, which has helped him to achieve these elements in his aloof and constructed compositions. These images also exclude any form of narration, an element which, if one thinks of images by Wall or Douglas, essentially sparks links to the history of film. In Gursky's case, references to film rarely occur in an obvious way; however, some of the technical aspects of his work find their origins in film production.

His approach can be split into production and post-production stages.<sup>697</sup> During the actual production Gursky works with his assistant; in the case of '*Hamm, Bergwerk Ost*' (2008) he shot a variety of images, later used as a pictorial archive for the actual composition.<sup>698</sup> In the post-production stage Gursky works with his graphic designer in his studio.<sup>699</sup> Here the images are manipulated to different extents: some photographs are diptychs like '*Paris, Montparnasse*' (1993), '*Schiesser-Diptychon*' (1991)<sup>700</sup> or

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<sup>695</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>696</sup> As explained in Chapter II.

<sup>697</sup> However, Gursky's production process is simpler compared to that of Wall.

<sup>698</sup> Schmidt-Garre 2009.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid.

<sup>700</sup> '*Schiesser*' (1991), diptych each 165x276 cm. Plate 60 in: Syring (ed.) 1998.

'Cairo' (1992).<sup>701</sup> Galassi first used the term '*diptychon*' for photographs that initially consisted of two pieces and were later joined digitally, as a panoramic view could not be achieved in one shot from a single angle without distortion. Later the process became more complicated and Gursky began to join several perspectives, as in his digital collages '*Kathedrale I*' (2007) and '*Prada II*' (1997).<sup>702</sup> His photograph '*Hamm, Bergwerk Ost*' (2008) went even further: here he joined different perspectives on the computer as well as including some images of miners that he had shot subsequently. His photograph '*Cocoon II*' (2008) includes parts that are photographed but it is, according to Gursky, '*no longer a photograph. [...] the whole space is completely artificial – it's calculated with an architectural software programme [sic]; it's not photographed*'.<sup>703</sup> Gursky's approach has become increasingly complex; oscillating not only between analogue and digital techniques but also between documentary and complete fiction.

### **3. Photographie Noir : Wall**

In the mid-1970s, Wall worked at an independent cinema in Vancouver, where his job was to check the condition of the prints. He later recalled: '*That's when I started to appreciate film as photography*'.<sup>704</sup> With his interest in film growing Wall toyed with the idea of becoming a filmmaker, but was warned by his mentor Ian Wallace: '*I kept saying to Jeff, knowing he was a control freak, "Hitchcock was able to have a lot of control over the images in his work, but you won't be able to go to Hollywood and have that kind of detailed control in a movie"*'.<sup>705</sup> It was after a failed attempt to produce a Hitchcock-influenced film with Wallace and fellow Vancouver artist Rodney Graham that Wall decided a career as a filmmaker was not for him.<sup>706</sup> Wall left it to Wallace to pick up the pieces of their film project who then used the film stills for his photo-murals '*The Summerscript*' (1974).<sup>707</sup> However, this brief unsuccessful interlude did not put an end to Wall's general fascination with film and its production, as he pointed out: '*I'm interested in filmmaking [...] – looking at a film is just a very unusual way of looking at*

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<sup>701</sup> 'Cairo' (1992), diptych each 129.5x154.5 cm. Plates 42/43 in: *ibid*.

<sup>702</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>703</sup> Lane 2009.

<sup>704</sup> Burnett 2005a, 10.

<sup>705</sup> Lubow 2007.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid*.

photographs. [...] But cinematography is just a branch of photography seen in that light. Therefore, all the qualities that you can find in filmmaking are available to the photographer.<sup>708</sup> Film strictly speaking consists of film stills, a fact that caused Wall to reiterate that 'the techniques we normally identify with film are in fact just photographic techniques and are therefore at least theoretically available to any photographer.'<sup>709</sup> Other photographers, for example Cindy Sherman, might have had similar thoughts: she actually played with the pictorial kinship of film and photography when she made her black and white series 'Untitled Film Stills' between 1977 and 1980.<sup>710</sup> Sherman's photographs, in which she always plays the leading role, imitate the design of film stills in regard to style, light and composition. However, for Wall, who sees 'film as a principle model [sic] for photography',<sup>711</sup> his work is not about imitating the appearance and composition of film stills; it uses cinematographical principles with staged settings, cast actors, expensive light arrangements and photographs digitally revised with great care. Nothing is left to chance and everything is edited, as in a film production.

Wall's photograph 'Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994' (1994) (Plate 46) is partly determined by stylistic elements in *film noir*. The photograph pictorializes the short story 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters' (The Cares of a Family Man) (1919) by Franz Kafka.<sup>712</sup> *Film noir* as a term, indicates more a style or narrative tendency than a genre and was first used by French critics in 1946 for American films made during the war.<sup>713</sup> *Film noir* is mainly characterized by a gloomy, dark and disillusioned setting and plot presented through the use of 'distinctive high and low angles, low key lightning, extreme wide-angle lenses, and location shooting.'<sup>714</sup> Wall's wide-angled shoot depicts a young girl walking down a badly lit staircase and captures the uncanny atmosphere Kafka describes in his short story. The girl's demeanour and facial expression suggest that she feels uncomfortable, maybe even vulnerable. Her head is bent slightly forward; her eyes look down as she walks down the stairs in her open sandals. The middle ground is dominated by the darkness under the staircase and the narrow passageway to the cellar door as well as by a wall on which a dirty-looking sink is fitted. The

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<sup>708</sup> Wall n.d.b.

<sup>709</sup> Wall 2007a, 179-180.

<sup>710</sup> Sherman 2003.

<sup>711</sup> Wagstaff 2005b, 13.

<sup>712</sup> Kafka's short story was first published in the weekly newspaper 'Selbstwehr' on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1919. In 1920 Kafka published the volume 'Ein Landarzt', which included 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters' and several other essays: Dierks 2003.

<sup>713</sup> Koebner (ed.) 2007, 224-227.

<sup>714</sup> Thompson/Bordwell 2003.

banister, the sink and the descending girl all cast long shadows. On the right side at the foot of the staircase a closed brown door can be seen and on the far left side another door, maybe the front entrance, is slightly lit on its upper edge but lies otherwise in complete darkness. The photograph is dominated by overlapping dark spaces, which leaves room for speculation as to what lies behind the doors and what is hiding in the darkness. However, the spectator's eyes are led back to the descending girl, which in the overall composition occupies only a small space. The most prominent space in the middle of the composition lies in almost complete darkness; here one can spot an enigmatic star-shaped object.

Kafka's short story is about a small creature, partly wooden object and partly living, called 'Odradek': *'At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors.'*<sup>715</sup> According to Kafka, Odradek leads a hidden existence living in domestic spaces, lurking behind stairways or in lobbies, never to be seen by anyone, and yet he gives no explanation to the reader as to what sort of creature Odradek really is. Even the actual word 'Odradek' proves to be inconclusive: *'Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.'*<sup>716</sup> This has led to speculations as to the possible meaning of the word 'Odradek'. Max Brod thought it to be of Slavonic origin with the meaning 'Abtrünniger' (deserter, renegade),<sup>717</sup> and Wilhelm Emrich speculated about its etymological links with the Czech verb 'odradit', which could be translated as 'to dissuade a person from something or to counsel against something'.<sup>718</sup> Sonja Dierks

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<sup>715</sup> 'Es sieht zunächst aus wie eine flache sternartige Zwirnspule, und tatsächlich scheint es auch mit Zwirn bezogen, allerdings durften es nur abgerissene, alte aneinander geknotete, aber auch miteinander verfilzte Zwirnstücke von verschiedener Art und Farbe sein.' Kittler/Koch/Neumann (eds.) 1996. Translated quote from: Glatzer 1971, 427-428.

<sup>716</sup> 'Die einen sagen, das Wort Odradek stamme aus dem Slawischen und sie suchen auf Grund dessen die Erklärung des Wortes nachzuweisen. Andere wieder meinen es stamme aus dem Deutschen, vom Slawischen nur beeinflusst. Die Unsicherheit beider Deutungen aber läßt wohl mit Recht darauf schließen, daß keine zutrifft, zumal man auch mit keiner von ihnen einen Sinn des Wortes finden kann.' Kittler/Koch/Neumann (eds.) 1996. Translated quote from: Glatzer 1971, 427-428.

<sup>717</sup> Brod 1922.

<sup>718</sup> Emrich 1958.

has suggested that the interpretative process as to what sort of word, thing, or creature 'Odradek' actually is, is a task shared between the main character, '*the family man*', and the reader.<sup>719</sup> Kafka's short story circles around what 'Odradek' stands for: he tries to interpret Odradek's etymological origins, appearance and purpose; describing, as it were, his habit of living alternately in the attic, the stairway, the hall and the entrance. Sometimes it disappears for months, maybe living in another house, but then suddenly reappears. Kafka explains Odradek's behaviour and reflects on the purpose of its existence and here, the family man wonders whether Odradek could possibly die: '*Anything that dies has had some kind of life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek.*'<sup>720</sup> The family man realizes – paradoxically after he and the reader have done exactly this – that Odradek cannot be interpreted and judged by human standards. That Odradek is likely to survive the family man and might be encountered by his children is '*almost painful*' to him.<sup>721</sup>

And it is exactly here that Wall's photograph continues and updates Kafka's short story in regard to the content, catapulting the plot with his photographic depiction into the present time, the year 1994. Wall's oeuvre includes several of these '*updates*' or '*remakes*' after literary or pictorial models; most famously he updated Manet's '*Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' in '*Picture for Women*', making reference to the content of the composition as well as the external structure of Manet's painting.<sup>722</sup>

Wall, who enjoys reading Kafka, travelled to Prague in the winter of 1993 in his search for Odradek's staircase: '*I started going up and down the streets poking into doorways and the entrances of apartments [...] I wanted the picture to be a photograph done as if I were visiting Prague and I got a glimpse of him [Odradek] in the stairs, there in the shadow, barely noticeable.*'<sup>723</sup> In Wall's photograph '*Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994*' (1994) the family man's worries become reality: Odradek has survived him and is close to encountering maybe one of his great-grandchildren. As in Kafka's short story, Wall leaves open the question of what and where Odradek is, even though it might occupy the most prominent place in the middle of the image between the darkness of the staircase and the wall of the narrow passageway to the cellar,

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<sup>719</sup> Dierks 2003.

<sup>720</sup> '*Alles was stirbt hat vorher ein Ziel, eine Art Tätigkeit gehabt und daran hat es sich zerrieben; das trifft bei Odradek nicht zu.*' Kittler/Koch/Neumann (eds.) 1996. Translated quote from: Glatzer, 1971, 427-428.

<sup>721</sup> Translated quote from: Glatzer 1971, 427-428.

<sup>722</sup> Barents 2007, 187-188; Burnett 2005a, 9; see also Chapter III.

<sup>723</sup> Burnett 2005a, 76.

where it lives according to Kafka's description and where the spectator can see something star-shaped on the floor in Wall's photograph.

Not unlike Kafka's story, which describes the existence of a thing called 'Odradek' without ever defining it in any way, Wall's photograph seems to be proof of Odradek's existence but also delivers no explanation as to what sort of creature he actually is. In Wall's chosen title the spectator is confronted with the subject matter (Odradek), a street name and number (Táboritská 8), the name of a city (Prague, where Kafka lived all his life) and an actual date (18<sup>th</sup> July 1994) when Wall took his photograph of Odradek.<sup>724</sup> The address refers to an existing house in the city centre of Prague, according to Jean-Christophe Ammann;<sup>725</sup> however rather than being a snapshot the actual photograph was carefully staged in the stairwell in 1994.<sup>726</sup>

Wall's images often depict people or locations which would otherwise be hidden, invisible, forgotten or neglected. Asked about the hidden spaces in 'Odradek' Wall remarked: *'Things unseen. Yes, I love that feeling and I often try for it. I think pictures are made up of their visible and their unseen parts. One of the marks of a good picture is that the unseen parts resonate inside it so that you imagine their unseen-ness.'*<sup>727</sup> In 'Odradek', a common staircase becomes a mysterious place through strong light and dark contrasts. Wall creates dramatic shadows, working like a painter with a *chiaroscuro*-effect, which can often be seen in the *film noir* genre.<sup>728</sup> The strong light contrasts create a sinister atmosphere for what would be otherwise a completely ordinary-looking scene in which a girl descends a staircase to leave a house.

The staircase itself, as Rolf Lauter remarks, is a place *'where people meet, but it is generally empty and unoccupied'* and therefore has to be seen *'as a place of history, memories and transience. The stairs, as a symbol for "vanitas", constitute a plane of individual and collective memories in both Kafka and Wall. Countless events have taken place here that survive only in the memories of the people involved and will pass into oblivion when they die. Odradek is part of this collective process of forgetting, but also a symbol of the collective memory.'*<sup>729</sup> The girl becomes part of the process of remembrance and oblivion depicted in the moment of descending the staircase, a

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<sup>724</sup> Vischer/Naef (eds.) 2005.

<sup>725</sup> Ammann 2001.

<sup>726</sup> Vischer/Naef (eds.) 2005.

<sup>727</sup> Burnett 2005a, 77.

<sup>728</sup> *Chiaroscuro* (Italian 'light-dark') describes the effect of light and dark mainly in paintings, especially referring to strong contrasts.

<sup>729</sup> Lauter (ed.) 2001, 53-54.

moment in which an action takes place and time passes; maybe she doesn't know anything about Odradek and is close to encountering it for the first time, or maybe she has met it already and this encounter will enable her to tell its tale in the future.

The depiction of movement and in particular the motif of a human figure descending a staircase can be found throughout the different pictorial genres; for example Eadweard Muybridge's '*Woman Walking Downstairs*' (1884/85)<sup>730</sup> consists of a series of twenty-three photographs depicting a nude woman descending a staircase, depicting her from the left, right and front. Muybridge's chrono-photography made visible a chronological sequence of movement which would otherwise be invisible to the human eye. His motif also inspired other artists like Marcel Duchamp, whose painting '*Nu Descendant un Escalier, No. 2*' (1912) (Plate 47) offered an aesthetic solution for the depiction of motion through painting. Duchamp meticulously painted the numerous single movements of a nude male while walking down a staircase, but unlike Muybridge, Duchamp incorporated the series of movements into one painting, resulting in the abstract portrayal of a human figure.

Whereas Duchamp offers a depiction of the complete movement, Gerhard Richter's '*Ema – Nude on a Staircase*' (1966) (Plate 48) freezes just one single moment of descending movement. Richter, like Duchamp, modelled his painting on photography; he used one of the images he had taken of his former wife descending a staircase. Richter's paintings often establish a relationship between painting and photography: while using photographs as a model or a canvas, he challenges photography's promise to record reality through his process of painting and uses the photograph as '*a basis for a pictorial statement*'.<sup>731</sup> Whereas Muybridge and Duchamp tried with their different ways of depiction to capture the complete sequence of the movement, Richter and Wall choose to depict only one decisive moment in the overall movement.

Wall's photographs often unite facts, i.e. documentary elements, with fiction, i.e. cinematographic inventions; in combination these are two essential components for making a film. '*Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994*' (1994) documents a common and daily task of a girl descending a staircase. These documentary elements are joined with Kafka's literary fiction, which becomes visible mainly through the photograph's title. Wall is also able to preserve Kafka's aim; Kafka's short story and Wall's pictorial portrayal invite the reader or spectator to explore the phenomenon of

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<sup>730</sup> Muybridge's '*Woman Walking Downstairs*' (1884/85) originates from the series of photographs '*Animal Locomotion*'.

<sup>731</sup> Frizot 1998e.



'Odradek', but in the end neither the text nor the image can explain the existence of the flat star-shaped thread spool.<sup>732</sup>

Unlike a film, Wall's photograph has to depict the essence of a plot, given that there is no explanatory beginning or end to it: his image leaves it to the viewer's imagination to anticipate what has happened before and after the displayed scene, a precondition for creating a narrative effect and an important cinematographical element. In addition, the gloomy and hidden spaces depicted in the image create a feeling of suspense, as we do not know what might be lurking in the darkness. Unlike Hitchcock, who could create a feeling of suspense through music and plot by giving the viewer more information about what might happen to his protagonist, who could be still completely oblivious to his situation, Wall has to create the feeling of unease through his pictorial arrangement and can give the spectator supplementary information only through the title of his photograph. Only the title indicates, presuming one knows Kafka's short story, the fact that Odradek might be present under the staircase which the girl is descending, creating a feeling of suspense.

Suspense and excitement are inevitably linked with our own expectations of what might happen next. Unseen places, hidden things and unexpected events create the tension and attentiveness that are key, not only in film, to inspiring the spectator's imagination to create a narrative. Wall's black and white photograph '*Passerby*' (1996), for example, leaves us guessing as to what actually happened when two men passed each other in a dark street. One cannot see their faces and they appear as if they are running away from each other. The man in the foreground looks back over his shoulder at the man who is disappearing into the darkness, his figure half hidden by the tree. The source of light, maybe a street light, illuminates only the foreground and the reflective surface of the 'stop' sign in the distance. We cannot see what lies at the end of the street. Where is the second man running to? What has happened between them? It is not even possible to guess, given that we cannot see their facial expression or a gesture that might help us to come to a conclusion. What appears like an accidental shot took Wall, according to Craig Burnett, around two weeks during which

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<sup>732</sup> Kafka's work included a variety of strange creatures and animals, which were often used to explore philosophical, religious or psychological issues or which related in some cases directly to Kafka's own life. For example, '*Die Verwandlung*' (The Metamorphosis) (1915) about Gregor Samsa, a sales man, who slowly turned into an insect or the unfinished short story '*Der Bau*' (The Burrow) (1923/24) about a creature half badger half mole which obsessively builds a underground tunnel system in order to live in safety of his apparent enemies.

he took 200 photographs, from which he chose one.<sup>733</sup> Wall's photographs tell a story in very condensed form, like film. Digital manipulation, editing and montage and even a sophisticated selection process involving numerous images enable Wall to compress the time and space of a story into a single shot.

#### **4. Semi-documentary of a *Genius Loci*:<sup>734</sup> Douglas**

Stan Douglas, a fellow student of Wall, who was also mentored by Ian Wallace at the Vancouver Art School, has like Wall begun to produce photographs of a semi-documentary nature. His photographs often establish a relation to local history, sometimes representing specific historical events or trying to capture the distinctive *genius loci* in his work.<sup>735</sup> Like a photographed documentary drama, these images are based on real events and meticulously staged like, for example, '*Abbot & Cordova, 7 August 1971*' (2008) (Plate 49). From an elevated viewpoint the spectator looks onto a street scene in which policemen and mounted police in riot gear charge a scattered group of protesters at a crossroad. Several policemen try to push an arrested woman into their car, while their colleagues further down the street drag a man along the junction in their direction and mounted officers charge smaller groups of protesters at the periphery. In the background in front of a building with boarded-up windows a small group of well-dressed onlookers seems to follow the event just like the couple sitting on the pavement under the street light watching the scene of violence completely motionless and indifferently.

The title '*Abbot & Cordova, 7 August 1971*' (2008) gives, like that of Wall's photograph of Kafka's '*Odradek*', an exact location and date where and when the depicted event took place, making a general reference to the aspiration of photography to be able to document and record. Douglas's photo-mural depicts a crossroad located a couple of blocks away from the spot where the demonstration was staged which had erupted into severe violence and is locally known as Vancouver's '*Gastown riot*' or '*the Battle of Maple Tree Square*'.<sup>736</sup>

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<sup>733</sup> Burnett 2005a, 81.

<sup>734</sup> The term *genius loci* is used here in its contemporary meaning, referring to the particular and distinctive atmosphere of a place.

<sup>735</sup> This approach can also be seen in Richter's work, for example in his series of fifteen paintings about the Red Army Faction titled '*18<sup>th</sup> October 1977*' (1988) he used film stills as well as press and police photographs.

<sup>736</sup> Laurence 2009.

According to Douglas the depiction of the Gastown riot captures a moment of local history that had long-term consequences for the community as well as for their urban habitat:<sup>737</sup> *‘[The riot] was critical in changing the Downtown Eastside from what it was to what it is today.’*<sup>738</sup> On that particular day hundreds of youths, referred to derogatively as ‘hippies’ by the then mayor Tom Campbell,<sup>739</sup> came together in Maple Tree Square to stage a ‘*pot-smoking event*’. While they were smoking marijuana in public, listening to music and dancing, the police began to move in. The demonstration had been sparked by a series of newspaper articles in Vancouver’s ‘*Georgia Straight*’ which had supported the idea of protesting against the current drug laws and policing methods and drug raids in the area.<sup>740</sup> In the end around 2,000 people assembled in the area to stage a peaceful protest.<sup>741</sup> Following rumours to the effect that properties had been damaged, the police began to clear the area with officers on horseback and in riot gear, at which point the situation escalated: demonstrators were beaten with riot sticks, arrested by plain-clothes officers and charged by police riding into the crowds on the pavements.

In the end seventy-nine people were arrested and thirty-eight charged with committing an offence.<sup>742</sup> Mayor Tom Campbell later defended the action and the harsh use of violence, seeing the hippies, as reported by arts journalist Robin Laurence, as ‘*dangerously anti-establishment and highly threatening to the status quo*’.<sup>743</sup> However, the handling of the event and the mayor’s reaction to it caused public outrage and later resulted in an order by the Attorney General for a thorough investigation into the circumstances of the riot. The Supreme Court judge in charge came to the conclusion ‘*that individual officers used “unnecessary, unwarranted and excessive force”*’.<sup>744</sup>

Douglas’s photograph of the riot portrays the changes this neighbourhood has undergone: whereas in the 1950s the area was associated with the working class, and consisted of residential and commercial buildings, the 1970s showed a different picture, with deserted industrial buildings and most of the original inhabitants gone. The increase in property prices and demand for public housing led to people who could not

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<sup>737</sup> Kamping-Carder 2009.

<sup>738</sup> Laurence 2009.

<sup>739</sup> CBC Online Archive n.d.

<sup>740</sup> Canada’s Human Rights History n.d.

<sup>741</sup> Ibid.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid.

<sup>743</sup> Laurence 2009; CBC Online Archive n.d.

<sup>744</sup> Canada’s Human Rights History n.d.

afford to buy or live in the more developed areas of the city becoming interested in this almost derelict urban area, with many youngsters squatting in the unused buildings. After the Gastown riot, the Vancouver council banned residential developments in the area completely and developed it as an exclusively commercial district, causing Gastown, in Douglas's view, to '*decline for more than three decades*'.<sup>745</sup> The redevelopment of the Woodward building, where Douglas's scene is set and where his photo-mural is displayed, sponsored by the development company,<sup>746</sup> tries to change Gastown's appearance yet again, reuniting living and commercial spaces, in an attempt to create a more benign urban space.

Douglas developed and planned his idea for a digital photograph of the riot carefully over some time, much like the director of a documentary drama. He established the historical facts about the demonstration and riot through research in public archives, newspaper articles and videotapes. He then wrote a script consisting of nine scenes and began to build the set – photographing in the actual location would have been too expensive. His preparations included the casting of eighty actors and, to ensure historical accuracy, costumes and props for the shoot needed to be found. The actual shoot took three nights, during which Douglas made fifty different photographs.<sup>747</sup> These images formed an archival portfolio from which he drew the resources for his final digital composition, a procedure also used by Gursky and Wall.

Technically Douglas's digital photograph is a carefully staged and digitally assembled scene of the Gastown riot restaged according to a script in a reconstructed set; in terms of its content, the digital collage is based on an actual historical incident that, in the main, depicts the superior, sometimes arbitrary, power of the state and its occasionally brutal and controversial application of the law against its citizens. In 2008, Douglas exhibited some of his works which are united by this overarching theme at the David Zwirner Gallery under the title '*Humor, Irony and the Law*',<sup>748</sup> in a reference to an essay written in 1967 by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who argues that humour and irony are two essential elements for undermining the law. Deleuze concludes that the law can be challenged either by anarchism or by undermining it all together by ridiculing its consequences.<sup>749</sup> With their depiction of the abuse of state power and law, Douglas modelled his works and the exhibition arrangement on Deleuze's essay: the

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<sup>745</sup> Laurence 2009.

<sup>746</sup> Kamping-Carder 2009.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> David Zwirner Gallery n.d.a.

<sup>749</sup> Deleuze n.d.

film installation '*Vidéo*' (2007) depicts the violation of privacy with surveillance cameras and '*Ballantyne Pier, 18 August 1935*' (2008)<sup>750</sup> and '*Abbot & Cordova, 7 August 1971*' (2008) depict the brutal suppression of union strikes and demonstrations.

Not unlike those of Wall and Gursky, Douglas's works are often inspired by literary works, photographic and film models. For example his film installation '*Vidéo*' (2007) makes reference to Franz Kafka's novel '*Der Prozeß*' (The Trial) (1925) and its screen adaptation by Orson Welles as well as to Samuel Beckett's only film, so aptly titled '*Film*'. In '*Vidéo*' the protagonist, a young black woman called 'K', appears in a courtroom to give her final speech, another unmistakable resemblance to Kafka's main character in '*The Trial*', Josef K.. Douglas's '*Vidéo*' is an almost entirely silent video installation: the only sound comes from a guitar and one gunshot; again this is a reference, in this case to Beckett's '*Film*', which too is almost silent except for one '*shhh*'.<sup>751</sup>

Other models for Douglas's oeuvre<sup>752</sup> include for instance the photographic work of Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee. For his exhibition '*Midcentury studio*' in 2011, Douglas tried to copy Weegee's way of photography, imagining himself in the role of a busy street photographer and adopting his style and technique, an experiment that resulted in staged black and white photographs aping the appearance of photojournalism in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>753</sup>

When it comes to film, Douglas has used elements of different genres. For example, his film '*Klatsassin*' appears to be in the style of a fictitious Western; however, the story is based on an historical event, the so-called '*Chilcotin War*' in 1864 in which immigrant settlers and builders were killed in the woods of British Columbia. The film title '*Klatsassin*' refers to the name of the chief of the Chilcotin tribe and means, in their aboriginal language, '*We do not know his name.*'

Douglas's film is based on events which took place on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1864: fourteen members of a larger work party were found dead in the western Canadian woods while working on a road project which would have allowed them to move further into the territory of the Chilcotin tribe. Some of the survivors later identified the chief of the tribe Klatsassin as the ringleader of a small group of aboriginal men who carried out the

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<sup>750</sup> The photograph refers to the battle of Ballantyne Pier in Vancouver in 1935 in which dockers voiced their right to a further wage increase and were met by heavily armed police: Libcom.org 2007 and Vancouver Past Tense History Blog 2009.

<sup>751</sup> Beckett/Schneider 1965.

<sup>752</sup> Mack 2011; Aletti 2011.

<sup>753</sup> Aletti 2011.

attacks. Colonial forces numbering around 100 men were sent out to find the chief and his supporters, a search that proved to be time-consuming and difficult in the vast search area.<sup>754</sup> Klatsassin and some of his men were captured, brought to trial and condemned to be hanged.<sup>755</sup>

Historically the judgement proved to be controversial, given that the Chilcotin tribe had not carried out the attack on the settlers simply to murder them, but more likely, and with regard to the historical sources, to defend themselves and their territory against the settlers. The immigrants were not only interested in establishing new areas for their settlements; they were also looking to mine new gold veins and therefore needed to build a sufficient infrastructure. With it came an intrusion of tribal settlements and their hunting grounds, as well as highly infectious diseases like smallpox. On 19<sup>th</sup> March 1862 the *British Colonist* reported: '*For three or four days past rumours have prevailed in town to the effect that the small pox had broken out, and that several cases of the worst type were already under treatment.*'<sup>756</sup> The aboriginals had no immunity to such an aggressive virus, which killed many members of their tribe. Five months later, on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1862, the *British Colonist* newspaper informed their readers about incidents of looting and murder by aboriginal tribes on the northwest coast of British Columbia: '*They [the aboriginals] wanted satisfaction for friends lost by smallpox and other diseases caught from the whites; others said that they were determined that the whites should not settle on their lands, or mine in their rivers, and frighten away the game.*'<sup>757</sup>

Douglas used the historic event as a basis for his film, in which a man is found dead on a secluded path in the woods. In twenty-seven scenes all the protagonists tell the event from their own point of view;<sup>758</sup> these scenes are randomly looped together, preventing any chronological order of the events and making it impossible for the viewer to discover the truth about what had actually happened – especially given that it is nearly impossible as a visitor to a gallery or a museum to be physically present for nearly seventy hours of film. The viewer gets only a partial glimpse of the plot, but is denied an overview. In addition, there are numerous changes to the perspective,

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<sup>754</sup> Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History n.d.b.

<sup>755</sup> Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History n.d.a; Executed Today.Com 2008.

<sup>756</sup> Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History n.d.c.

<sup>757</sup> Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History n.d.d.

<sup>758</sup> The idea of allowing all the protagonists to give their account of the event is a reference to Akira Kurosawa's Japanese crime film '*Rashomon*' (1950), which tells the story of a murder from different viewpoints: Art Knowledge News n.d.

retrospective and repetitive sequences and different timelines confusing the spectator. Even though the content is unconventionally arranged, the cinematic style refers to the genre of a classical Western with three acts. And again, similar to Douglas's '*Humour, Irony and the Law*' series his film is rooted in Canadian history, exploring the past of a particular location, and the content touches on sensitive social and political aspects. The viewer of '*Klatsassin*' witnesses the effects of colonialism and the capitalist greed for gold and its consequences, right up to murder and manslaughter.

Douglas spends a huge amount of time on the execution and presentation of his work, in particular his film work, with its analyses of past and present political and social realities. There are film plots narrated from different viewpoints, randomly strung together, without any logical order ('*Klatsassin*'), linear films that can consist of six versions ('*Vidéo*'), or films presented as a double projection (two different films projected simultaneously) like '*Der Sandmann*'. This 16 mm black and white film is based on the eponymous novel by E.T.A. Hoffmann, written in 1817, which would inspire Sigmund Freud's essay '*The Uncanny*' (1919). Douglas shot his film in the UFA studios in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Berlin, where he rebuilt the whole setting of a German '*Schrebergarten*' (allotment) for his version of Hoffmann's novel. The film is arranged as a double projection: one depicts the allotment during the 1960s and the other the allotment right at the end of 1980s, as a building site.<sup>759</sup> The spectator witnesses the physical change in the allotment before and after the Berlin Wall. Whereas the allotments under Communism were an oasis for the working class, after the collapse of the GDR (German Democratic Republic, i.e. East German) they become real-estate ventures in the selling off of common land by local councils. The films are projected onto one screen, showing the old and new *Schrebergarten* next to each other with a slight time delay. Despite the time difference the projections adjoin each other so that they create one physical image which is, strictly speaking, separated by a time gap.

His film installation must have been complex and costly to realize, and given that video and film installations are probably attractive only to the sophisticated collectors' market that has the necessary financial means and the physical facilities for buying, storing and preserving these pieces,<sup>760</sup> the making of such works could lead to financial problems. However, Douglas also sells photographs of his films and videos;

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<sup>759</sup> Dressler 2007.

<sup>760</sup> The German Friedrich Christian Flick Collection is in possession of eighteen video installations and several photographs – almost the complete oeuvre – by Stan Douglas: Friedrich Christian Flick Collection (ed.) 2006.

for example the '*Klatsassin*' film inspired two series of photographs, one consisting of landscapes and interiors of British Columbia and the other a black and white series of portraits of the main protagonists of '*Klatsassin*'.<sup>761</sup> Not only is Douglas able to create with his photographs a more affordable by-product for the art market and ordinary art lover, but he also stays true to his photographic roots.

Yet the question comes back to the content of Douglas's works: what aspects of history are we actually looking at? The David Zwirner Gallery, to which Douglas is contracted, released a press statement for his '*Midcentury*' exhibition summarizing Douglas's work in a brief introduction as follows: '*Since the late 1980s, Douglas has created films, photographs, and installations that reexamine particular locations or past events. His works often take their points of departure in local settings, from which broader issues can be identified.*'<sup>762</sup> Douglas's works are often based on historical occurrences; they address the 'broader societal issues' deriving from the misuse of the state power. His films and photographs tell a story of arbitrary jurisdiction, the excessive use of executive forces like the army or police and the abuse or avoidance of legislative power. Douglas presents us with the consequences of capitalist greed, the fatal use of police forces, discrimination against minorities and the consequences of a dominant Orwellian state. It is the failure of the modern version of Thomas More's 'Utopia', of '*the imaginary island that enjoys a perfect social, legal and political system*'.<sup>763</sup> Douglas's works illustrate a failed utopia; the realization that they are often re-staged and therefore might in some way or other be an exaggerated depiction is a short-lived hope. They are based on documents, news coverage, articles, photographs and interviews. Douglas presents us with a real and global dystopia; even more uncomfortable is the thought that these are not extreme dystopian versions of repressive, totalitarian dictatorships. His work, sadly, represents the failure of our democratically elected governments. Unlike George Orwell's book '*1984*', from which we can escape by putting it back into the bookshelf, Douglas's dystopian vision is hard to avoid, given that we are surrounded by it.

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<sup>761</sup> The first series displays landscapes and interiors in British Columbia, for example the Stanley Cemetery, a Masonic Lodge in Barkerville, the Maritime Worker's Hall and McLeod's Bookshop in Vancouver, Quesnel Forks, Walhachin, and Spences Bridge. The second series comprises black and white portraits of the main characters from *Klatsassin*: David Zwirner Gallery n.d.b.

<sup>762</sup> Press release at David Zwirner Gallery n.d.c.

<sup>763</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 1989.



## **5. Vision without Motion**

In 1927, Moholy-Nagy wrote that photography was an interesting study area for film and vice versa, film was a patron and inspirer of photography.<sup>764</sup> He therefore pointed out that film offered principles that could be used in the photographic process and benefit the photographic result.<sup>765</sup> Although a photograph can portray only the essence of a plot, these photographers make use of features associated with the film trade: they construct sets or search for locations, cast professional or lay actors, work with artificial light arrangements on a cinematic scale and sometimes employ numerous collaborators to 'make' their images.

From the purely technical point of view, one has to note that these photographers all work with a hybrid approach, combining analogue and digital techniques. The actual shot is taken with a view camera, allowing them to control for example exposure, contrast and focus. Negatives are scanned and revised as digital files, which offer the advantage of manipulability. Their photographs therefore have nothing to do with the instantaneousness associated with the release of the shutter; instead these images are carefully and time-consumingly created montages that have been assembled, edited and cut like a film.

The techniques of digital image-processing have helped to create seamless montages and made it possible to combine documentary and fictional elements. These photographic constructions are related to the category of mock-documentary films, in that they include authentic and realistic elements with staged or computer-generated elements. Gursky for example uses a computer-generated background in *'Cocoon II'* (2008), combining it with shoots of one of his children and of himself. Wall has stated that he often recreates scenes that he has witnessed, as in *'Mimic'* (1982). And Douglas's photographs can be based on historical events which are later meticulously staged, for example *'Abbot & Cordova, 7 August 1971'* (2008). All combine real and staged elements, fact and fiction: on the one hand, they are true to the documentary nature of their photographic medium and, on the other, they include fictional elements associated with film.

Like a film that makes use of factual and fictional elements, these images create an illusion. In some cases, the spectator is immediately aware that s/he is looking into an artificial world (Douglas); in others it might not be so obvious at first sight (Wall,

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<sup>764</sup> *'Ein reziprokes Laboratorium: die Fotografie als Untersuchungsgebiet für den Film; und der Film als Förderer und Anreger der Fotografie.'* Moholy-Nagy 2006.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

Gursky). However, distinguishing invention from reality within a composition is sometimes impossible. Stephen Shore points out: *'Photography is inherently an analytical discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture.'*<sup>766</sup> Yet, these photographers select a number of pictures, which they later re-create on a computer screen as if it were their 'digital canvas'. These images are like Potemkin villages;<sup>767</sup> from the outside they appear like photographs but their inside remains invisible, hiding the complete spectacle of their construction. The artist James McNeill Whistler once said in regard to his paintings: *'A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared'*.<sup>768</sup>

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<sup>766</sup> Shore 2010, 37.

<sup>767</sup> The Russian prince Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin accompanied Catherine II on a trip along the Volga in 1787, where he had apparently ordered painted façades of villages and palaces – the so-called 'Potemkin villages' – to be built in advance, in order to impress her with the area's wealth: Heyne (ed.) 1976.

<sup>768</sup> McNeill Whistler 1892, 115-116.

## VI. Conclusion

I set out to investigate the oeuvre of the post-modern photographers Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall. To analyse their work it was, I felt, necessary to compare their work and approach with each other and with those of their contemporaries regardless of the genres in which these artists worked. This allowed me to explore and contrast in particular the oeuvre and approach of the painter Gerhard Richter with those of Gursky and Wall, opening up the boundaries between different genres and artistic practices. I hope to have shown that a 'pigeon-holing' of these artists into traditional categories is no longer appropriate, given that their use of digital techniques offers them a method of composing a photograph similar to the way a painter would plan and execute his work.

My analysis has endeavoured to show that Gursky and Wall draw on the unlimited resources of art history, which '*seems to possess a generally valid formal vocabulary*',<sup>769</sup> in Gursky's words. It proved fruitful to examine and compare Gursky's and Wall's work with no thematic or temporal restrictions, an approach that relates to the results of Aby Warburg's research where every artistic production has its origins in old imageries and traditional forms.<sup>770</sup> Therefore I examined, for example, Gursky's favoured choice of panoramic views in regard to Filippo Brunelleschi's (1377-1446) studies of linear perspective, and I analysed his work in regard to Andrea Alciati's (1492-1550) '*Emblematum liber*' in order to compare the post-modern photograph with the theory and idea of a Renaissance emblem. In Wall's case, for example, comparisons with Manet, Delacroix and Velázquez were necessary in light of his admission, in several interviews, of the extent to which they had influenced and inspired him.<sup>771</sup>

This *modus operandi* was enhanced by the inclusion of specific writings on the history and theory of photography; these theoretical sources similarly were subject to no temporal restriction. This enabled me in Gursky's case, for example, to analyse his work in conjunction with the teaching methods of Steinert and the Bechers, Kracauer's concept of the '*the Ornament of the Mass*', and to make necessary links to Martin Heidegger's work about art and technology. In regard to Wall's oeuvre it was necessary to examine Baudelaire's concept of '*the Painter of Modern Life*' and to explore Auerbach's writing on *mimesis* in relation to Wall's image '*Mimic*' (1982).

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<sup>769</sup> Gursky/Görner 1998, 10.

<sup>770</sup> Michels 2007.

<sup>771</sup> Burnett 2005a, 9.

I was also keen to explore the differences between Gursky's and Wall's artistic education and the influences that have benefited and contributed to their work. Therefore it was also necessary to investigate the oeuvre of their fellow students, teachers and mentors, which revealed - on the German side - a strict, far more rigorous and school-type approach, often with a focus on the technical and mechanical aspects of the photographic medium (Steinert and Becher), as a result of which the former Becher students still remain within the boundaries of photography. In contrast, it became clear that the Canadian artists are influenced by Conceptualism and Pop Art, which broadened their approaches, resulting in the inclusion of multiple genres, from photographs to video installation.

Gursky and Wall are, firstly, two art photographers who have benefited from conceptual trends and movements in contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s, as Michael Archer has pointed out: '*Cubist and other collages, Futurist performance and Dadaist events had already begun to challenge this simply duopoly [of painting and sculpture], and photography had increasingly been making a strong claim for recognition as an art medium.*'<sup>772</sup>

Secondly, unlike other post-modern photographers, it was possible to establish a personal connection between Gursky and Wall, who got to know each other while Gursky was a student at the Düsseldorf Art Academy: this kindled my interest in how much these artists influenced each other.

A main aim of the thesis was to shed light on the production process of these artists' images on an intellectual, as well as on a technical level. Gursky and Wall both started out with analogue photography, gradually introducing digitally altered photography into their work process; this made traceable the influence and consequences of digital techniques in respect of the work process and image composition.

It is notable in this regard that Gursky and Wall work with a '*hybrid approach*' that unites analogue and digital techniques in a complex process in order to produce a photograph: analogue negatives are scanned and transformed into a digital image/digital file, offering the possibility of revision or manipulation pixel by pixel at the computer screen. The digital file is then used to produce another negative that can be printed using conventional darkroom techniques.

This approach resulted in a change in the actual photographic process. The photographer Stephen Shore once remarked: '*Photography is inherently an analytic discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a*

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<sup>772</sup> Archer 2002, 11; See also Batchen 1997, 215-216.

*photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture.*<sup>773</sup> However, Shore's statement can no longer be applied to the '*hybrid approach*' of Gursky and Wall. Inevitably a selection process does take place, but not one that causes the immediate release of the shutter. Instead these photographers begin their photographic process by researching and planning the actual photograph. This can include the search for the right location and, eventually, the building of a stage set and the casting of actors (in particular in Wall's case). This step is followed by the actual photographic process, where numerous photographs are taken, always keeping in mind that several shots are needed for the next step: post-production. During the post-production process photographs are digitally manipulated and different pictures, parts or elements thereof are combined, enhanced, deleted or added. For example Wall's '*A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*' (1993) combines over a hundred images taken over a period of five months.

The post-production process also offers these photographers the chance to compose their images in a different way and to follow the composition process on screen. Gursky, for example, decided during the post-production process of '*Hamm, Bergwerk Ost*' (2008) that he needed to include at least some people in the foreground. Because nobody was photographed at the actual shoot he took a couple of pictures of several builders who were working in Thomas Ruff's studio, next door. Gursky directed them into position for his photographs, which were then included in the composition by his graphic designer.<sup>774</sup>

The next stage in the post-production process is developing, but the application of Talbot's discovery<sup>775</sup> has changed significantly: in Gursky's case, the developing of his photographs takes place at a professional photo laboratory where the negative is exposed to coloured lasers and then stored in a lightproof box, before being chemically developed. Wall, unlike Gursky, produces his photographs from start to finish in his own studio.

The use of the photographic medium together with computer technology, and the execution of the photographs, is a result of collaboration between the photographers and a number of people like graphic designers, specialist staff at the photo laboratory (Gursky) and photographic assistants (Gursky and Wall). Change in the work process

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<sup>773</sup> Shore 2010, 37.

<sup>774</sup> Schmidt-Garre 2009.

<sup>775</sup> In 1840 Henry Fox Talbot (1800-77) discovered that, after exposure in a camera, a negative consisted of an image that could be made visible through photo-chemical developing in a bath containing specific chemicals.

has also influenced the organization of the workplace. Wall, who wanted to produce his photographs in his own studio, converted two townhouses in Vancouver for this purpose: one hosts a darkroom and light tables,<sup>776</sup> while the second accommodates a computer workstation and a vat to develop oversized transparencies.<sup>777</sup>

The changes in the appearance of the workplaces of these photographers also reflect new print and framing techniques that offer different options for photographic presentation, most notably a change in size. The mid-1980s saw a shift from small-scale to large-scale photographs: it was now possible to produce large-scale printing paper, in particular following the invention of the chromogenic print (C-print) offering high-quality prints. Gursky and Wall shot negative sizes of 4"x5" or 8"x10" with their analogue view cameras that offered an ideal precondition for enlargement without any loss in quality.

Gursky and Wall are both in favour of large-scale presentation, usually consisting of two or more parts of photographic printing paper, which in Gursky's case are then joined together by hand at the Grieger photo laboratory. In terms of size and presentation, their photographs can compete with paintings. Whereas Wall presents his images as transparencies in lightboxes, a presentation form widely used by the advertising industry, Gursky favours photographs that are sealed under an acrylic surface using *Diasec*, resulting in a glossy appearance also associated with advertising. Photographic presentation as large-scale images also affects the composition. Both artists create panoramic images that are in need of close inspection and examination, allowing a close (microcosmic) and a distant (macrocosmic) view, in order to identify the wealth of detail contained in these photographs.

For the analysis of Gursky's and Wall's oeuvre in particular, I felt it was necessary and important to focus on the genesis of their images given that, on the one hand, photographs are still perceived as the most instantly readable and accessible art genre compared to painting, sculpture, print or installations, and that, on the other, even though the digital age is omnipresent and most people are aware of or are familiar with digital manipulation and revision, photographs are nevertheless still associated with a naïve promise to depict and document a truthful reflection of reality.

The debate about the death of photography is mainly concerned with digitally manipulated or even computer-generated images that look like photographs, a development that has led to a loss of faith in the assumed truthfulness of photographic depictions. Yet, in regard to 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographers like Bayard and Rejlander, it is

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<sup>776</sup> Wagstaff 2005a.

<sup>777</sup> Tumlr 2001, 150.

doubtful whether photographic truthfulness has ever existed, whether the photographic medium is able to capture a realistic *mimesis* at all.<sup>778</sup> The photographic medium has always been accompanied by the erosion of faith in the truthfulness of photography, a fact that is embedded in the history of the photographic medium. There are four key areas which need to be addressed with regard to photographic truth: the moment when a photograph is taken, the photographic representation and its meaning and perception. These areas can be particularly well illustrated by the theory of photography produced in the 1970 and 1980s written by Rosler, Burgin and Sekula. As Rosler and also Shore have argued, the actual photographic act is the result of several subjective choices which would mean that a photograph can not be seen as a truthful depiction of reality.<sup>779</sup>

Burgin reminded us that a photograph might make us believe that it represents a truthful recording of reality, although reality is more of a social construct: *'In the very moment of their being perceived, objects are placed within an intelligible system of relationships (no reality can be innocent before the camera). They take their position, that is to say, within an ideology. By ideology we mean, in its broadest sense, a complex of propositions about the natural and social world which would be generally accepted in a given society as describing the actual, indeed necessary, nature of the world and its events.'*<sup>780</sup>

And if we are to believe, as Burgin has pointed out, that reality is a socially constructed transformation, then we must also acknowledge the role which different societies play through their culturally-specific traditions and heritage. This is important in understanding how photographic meaning is created, as Sekula remarked: *'The meaning of a photograph [...] is inevitably subject to cultural definition'*, and according to Sekula, *'[...] is necessarily context-determined'*.<sup>781</sup> He explains that a photograph consist of several layers of meaning which are *'context-determined'* by which he refers

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<sup>778</sup> See also Chapter I.

<sup>779</sup> Rosler remarked: *'Any familiarity with photographic history shows that manipulation is integral to photography. Over and above the cultural bias towards "Renaissance space" that provides the conceptual grounding of photography itself, there are the constraints of in-camera framing, lenses, lighting, and filtration. In printing an image, the selection of paper and other materials affects colour or tonality, texture, and so forth. Furthermore, elements of the pictorial image can be suppressed or emphasized, and elements from other "frames" can be reproduced on or alongside them. And context, finally, is determining.'* Rosler 1989; Shore 2010, 110.

<sup>780</sup> Burgin 1988b, 45-46.

<sup>781</sup> Sekula 1988, 84-85.

to the creative context of the artist, the context of the public presentation, and the context of the spectator.<sup>782</sup>

Therefore the death of photographic truthfulness has happened long before the digital age<sup>783</sup>, and for photographers like Gursky and Wall it has had no importance at all given that their priority – and I hope this has become evident through the analysis of their photographs – is the realization of their pictorial idea. By composing and realizing their photographs with digital means they have questioned the documentary character of photography, i.e. the indexical link: as Gursky once admitted, they have succeeded in their aim ‘*to destroy the pictorial character of photography*’<sup>784</sup> and by doing so they have extended the boundaries of the photographic medium, which can no longer be seen as a tool of reproduction and depiction: it is a tool of creation and invention.

Given that photography can be seen as a creative and inventive tool and photographs are rather ‘made’ than ‘taken’, I was interested in what sort of elements affect the composition of these images. Gursky and Wall use and unite different sources in their artworks, making reference to pictorial and literary models, cinema and history. Gursky for example was inspired by Robert Musil’s unfinished novel ‘*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*’. Wall made reference with his photograph ‘*Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994*’ (1994) to Kafka’s short story ‘*Die Sorge des Hausvaters*’. Arden’s photographs refer to historic images and documents, sometimes from public archives. Graham’s ‘*Camera Obscura*’ (1979) installation refers directly to the history of photography.

A question that aroused my interest was why digital techniques were so useful to the work of these photographers. Many of the photographers studied here are inspired by the visual reality that surrounds them, but most of the time this level of reality is not what they have in mind for their pictorial portrayals; this is particularly relevant in regard to Gursky, Wall and Douglas. The reality that the analogue camera would record is often not enough for a convincing photograph. This is where digital processing techniques become useful for the realization of the pictorial idea. Gursky for example is able to impose artificial patterns on some of his depictions of the human mass. Arden’s and Douglas’s staged works express social criticism. Ruff, on the other hand, is mainly

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<sup>782</sup> Sekula uses two photographs to explain his theory, one made by Lewis Hine in 1905 ‘*Immigrants going down gangplank*’ and the other made by Alfred Stieglitz in 1907 ‘*The Steerage*’. It becomes clear that even photographs which try to document reality can be interpreted to contain a symbolic meaning. See Sekula 1988, 88-108.

<sup>783</sup> See also Batchen 1997, 212.

<sup>784</sup> See note 80.



interested in technical experimentation in regard to analogue and digital photography. His work is produced in conjunction with all sorts of photographic techniques and technical devices which question photography as a representational medium.

Given that photography is defined first and foremost by a technical process that includes a camera to record the captured subject matter and a recording medium to store the image either on (analogue) film or plate or (digital) memory chip, it will not come as a surprise to learn that such a technical process is subject to continuous change and progress and that artists will take advantage of this progress. I have suggested that rapidly advancing computer technology and print techniques have helped Baudelaire's 'secretary',<sup>785</sup> in the post-modern era, to become a chief executive. But what does that mean for the perception of post-modern digital photography? In the analogue age the act of photographing was defined by pointing a camera, pushing the button and recording a particular moment on film. Here the photographer took several decisions in 'composing' his image, as Stephen Shore explains: '*A photographer's basic formal tools for defining the content and organization of a picture are vantage point, frame, focus and time.*'<sup>786</sup> Therefore a photograph is organized, in Shore's words, by '*choice of vantage point (where exactly to take the picture from), frame (what exactly to include), time (when exactly to release the shutter), focus (what exactly to emphasize with the plane of focus).*'<sup>787</sup> As I have shown in the preceding chapters, these choices have been a threat to the alleged photographic truthfulness and objectivity which is still widely attached to the medium itself.<sup>788</sup>

However, in the digital age the choices a photographer has to make are different. Digital manipulation and revision of photographs on a computer screen enable the photographer to compose images like a painter: re-positioning, re-adjusting or re-designing the photograph directly in front of him. This process also allows the joining of elements and parts in a digital composition which would otherwise be separated by time and space, and provides the option of creating new structures, orders, relationships and narratives which might never have existed in reality. Digital techniques have not only changed the photographic process but also the appearance of photographs and how they are perceived. The use of digital techniques has allowed these photographers to open up the boundaries of the photographic medium by moving

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<sup>785</sup> See Chapter I.

<sup>786</sup> Shore 2010, 110.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>788</sup> See also Rosler for the '*modern idea of objectivity*', Rosler 1989; For a detailed definition of '*Objectivity*' and '*New Objectivity*' see page 34..

beyond the idea of depicting and documenting reality. More digital invention will definitely spark new ideas and approaches and will lead us to rethink how digitally altered art photographs and digital art can be viewed and analysed.<sup>789</sup> I hope that this study has contributed to a better understanding of photography in the digital age.

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<sup>789</sup> See also Ritchin 2009.

## **Plates**































































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